

## Halfway by [felix\\_atticus](#), [xJuniperx](#)

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**Summary:**

Four years later: Steve and Billy meet in secret on a regular basis. But it's just about sex. Right? Of course. Definitely just about the sex.

This is a complete work, with chapters uploaded once a day.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

- For [marsza](#).

For our most beloved Cymbelines. While you're writing the definitive Billy Hargrove redemption fic, we've also got some Harringrove to shower upon you for your birthday. We are so incredibly lucky to be friends with such a kind, hilarious, brilliant person. We love you to the moon and back. Happy Birthday!

Wild Hank's Firework Emporium. The bright yellow water tower. The dilapidated barn that leans and leans and never falls. Steve can recognize the landmarks by now. He's started to memorize what order they come in. A thrill sizzles through his limbs - he knows when he's getting close. Who knew it could feel so good to see that huge billboard, red and ominous, threatening him in big block letters, "He is coming. Are you prepared to face His judgement?"

It's been a week, which he knows isn't very long, but it seems like it's been forever since he made this trip. Like he'd lived a whole lifetime between then and now. Thinking back, he can't even remember what he'd done in that time, only that the days seemed to stretch on endlessly. But - there's that nondescript factory, smokestacks pumping out gray clouds so thick he thought the building was on fire the first time he saw them. He starts drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

A few miles later, he turns off the interstate. It's not the right exit, but - shit, he feels stupid. How did he almost forget? He imagines showing up empty-handed. That wouldn't have been a good look.

There's a gas station just outside the turnoff, and he slides up to a pump. His tank is still more than half full, but it's a reason to go inside. His car needs gas. Nothing unusual about that. He tops his fuel off, bouncing on the balls of his feet, then makes a mental note of the pump number before turning towards the brightly-lit store.

Once inside, he heads straight to the back and grabs a Coke from the cooler. Turning, he looks around, but he's the only one inside, and the cashier, a woman with bright red lipstick, isn't paying him any mind. So, he shuffles down a nearby aisle and stops in front of what he came here for. He doesn't linger, grabbing a box of condoms and a small bottle of lube from a low shelf with little thought, then heads to the counter.

"Pump four, please," he says, maybe a little overloud, as he lays his items down.

The cashier glances down at his selections, bored, then begins scanning them one by one. Steve feels his neck get hot as she wraps her fingers around the telltale bottle and he *swears* he sees the hint of a smirk on her lips as she holds it under the barcode scanner. On impulse, he grabs a couple candy bars and a pack of gum from the display rack in front of him and throws them on the pile.

The crisp night air feels astoundingly refreshing when he steps outside, plastic bag handles clutched in his fist. He slips back into the driver's seat and takes a long, deep breath before starting the car. At least he's prepared now. As prepared as he ever can be, anyway.

Just a couple more miles on the interstate, a few minutes of cruising down Lincoln Boulevard, and he's arrived. The Value Inn creeps up on his right, familiar as any landmark.

A long row of doors line a dark building, half the bulbs along the porches burnt out, the sign unlit, practically invisible in the night if not for the single neon sign in the office window and the tall street lights that surround it. It's a nothing place in a nowhere town. There's no bars or grocery stores or retail shops for miles but there's a 24-hour diner across the street.

He made good time, even with the unexpected stop. His car slows to a crawl after pulling into the drive, eyes scanning the parking lot, but he doesn't recognize any of the other cars. He gives the area another visual sweep, just to be sure, but - nothing. He slumps down in his seat.

Five silent minutes pass as he sits in his car in a deserted area of the

lot. Every time he sees headlights moving down the road toward him, he holds his breath, only to let it out again when the car speeds by. Anticipation and disappointment keep rolling through him in waves. It's nerve wracking and, when he thinks about it, pretty lame, waiting around like this. He's not usually the first one here.

The sound of the car door slamming behind him echoes in the open space, carried through the night air. Patting his pocket to make sure he's got his wallet, he starts walking away from the motel, away from his car, toward the refuge of the diner.

A woman with a nametag reading "Charlene" seats him at a booth by the window, lays a menu in front of him. Her dirty-blond hair has the kind of volume Steve only wishes he could achieve, and her voice is a little scratchy when she asks, "How are you tonight?"

"Doin' alright, thanks."

"What can I get for you, honey?" she says, holding a pen and a pad of paper aloft.

"Just a cup of coffee," he says. Then, on second thought, "and a side of fries," thinking it'll settle his stomach.

"Coming right up."

The parking lot is visible from where he's sitting - hell, it's really the only thing to look at out the window, aside from the glowing vacancy sign in the background, the trickle of speeding traffic in front, but staring across the street isn't doing his nerves any favors. He shifts his gaze, watching his waitress puttering around behind the counter. Needing something to do with his hands, he yanks a napkin from the dispenser on the table and begins folding it up, seeing how small and compact it'll get.

Despite his best efforts, he turns his head to examine the scene past the window more often than he'd like. He's spacing out, eyes fixed on the dark, empty space of the far distance, when his waitress slides a steaming cup of coffee in front of him.

"Fries'll be out in a minute, hon," she says. Steve nods and thanks

her, shaking himself just a bit.

She doesn't walk away like Steve expects, only cocks her hip, leaning against the edge of his table. "So what brings you out here this time of night?"

"Oh, um," he starts, his tongue fumbling in his mouth. "I'm just, uh--"

She's just making small talk, he reminds himself. She doesn't even know him. He doesn't have to tell her anything, though he could.

*Meeting a friend*, he almost says, but even that feels too revealing. What he's here for, he can't share with anyone, not even here in the middle of nowhere, to the woman serving him coffee and fries.

"Just passing through," he says, with a shrug.

"You and everybody else," she says, with a smile and a private laugh, some sort of inside joke with herself, Steve figures.

He returns her smile like he's in on it, raising his hands in a helpless gesture, then moves to busy himself with packets of sugar and tiny containers of cream. The waitress drifts away, mumbling a soft, "Be right back," and when she returns to drop off Steve's fries, she does so without comment, to his relief. It's not that he minds small talk - he just can't focus on two things at once right now.

By the time his coffee cup is fully drained, his throat feels too tight to finish his fries. He just can't get them down.

Where the hell is he?

A couple years ago, Steve opened a fortune cookie and the slip inside read, "Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst." Ever since then, it's sorta been his personal motto. After having lived through some of the things he has, he wouldn't call his line of thinking *pessimistic*, as much as realistic. This thing he's been doing - it wasn't built to last. He's known that since the beginning, all those months ago.

Still, they had *plans*. But as he's well aware, plans change. He's at least entitled to a phone call, though, he thinks. Before wasting his time, driving all this way.

When he next pulls his gaze from the window, he sees that he's smashing the end of a fry between his fingers. He hadn't even realized it. With a sharp sigh, he reaches for a napkin to wipe his hand, to clean the mushy remnants of his food off the table.

What is he even doing? He's getting stood up. Why the hell is he waiting around? Shaking his head, he grits his teeth and digs into his pocket for his wallet. If he leaves now, he can probably make it back to Hawkins by midnight.

He raises a hand to get his waitress's attention, ready to pay the check, but something draws his attention outside the window, and when he sees it, his chest swells with air, blood pumping doubletime all the way through to his fingers and toes.

There it is. The car he's been looking for, swinging into the parking lot and pulling up right next to his. The lights turn off. Steve just watches, vaguely aware his hand is still suspended in the air.

A long moment stretches on before there's movement - the shifting of a body, the opening of a door. Steve watches him step out, shut the door and look around, hand resting on the roof. He makes as if to walk toward the building with a few long strides, but then, second guessing, he doubles back to lean against the side of his car, facing away from where Steve is watching across the street.

Steve feels a little guilty, spying on the guy like this, but he can't look away. Well, he could, but - doesn't. He watches the flicker of a flame appear in front of him, sees that small, lingering orange glow. He watches the gleam of the street light reflect off the guy's curls as they're caught by the wind.

"Can I get you anything else?"

He jolts, head whipping around, and when he looks at his waitress, she's peering out the window, trying to follow Steve's gaze.

"The check," he says, loud, to pull her attention down. Softer, he adds, "I'm all set, I'll take the check, please."

"Alright, honey. You have a good night," she says, pulling a slip of

paper out of her apron and dropping it on the table. She smiles at him while walking away and it seems too keen, too knowing. He hastily drops a ten dollar bill on the table and makes his way to the door.

Before he leaves, he reaches up to comb his fingers through his hair. He tugs at the top, sliding through to smooth down the back. Gives it one final pass, tucking a bit behind his ears. It shouldn't still feel this way, he thinks, now that it's maybe the eighth or ninth time they've done this - he tries not to keep count. It should be old hat. But his palms are sweaty and his muscles are tense and he considers stepping into the bathroom to look in a mirror. Just in case.

With one last deep breath of slightly stale diner air, he steps outside. He straightens up, walking tall when he crosses the street, tucks his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans. As he gets close, he thinks he catches a whiff of cologne in the breeze.

Here we go.

Steve clears his throat gently, crosses his forearms over the top of his own car, and manages a low and steady, "Look who decided to show up."

As Billy turns around, Steve's nerves alight with crackling energy, and he knows he's smiling, can feel it on his face, but. Nothing he can really do about that.

~\*~

Billy doesn't respond to that right away. He can see the eagerness written all over Steve. He's taut like wires and open as a book. Billy is better at keeping things in. Habit, he guesses.

He finishes taking a drag on his cigarette and says, "I was here an hour ago to get the keys. TV in the room doesn't work, so I took a drive."

Steve drops his head, like he didn't even think of that. Billy's amused.

Did Steve think he'd been stood up? That's hilarious. Between the two of them, Billy's well aware that someday, one of them is going to show up here and the other won't, and that'll be the end of it. And he knows he won't be the one who doesn't show up.

Billy looks over Steve's shoulder, across the street. There's a figure standing in the brightly lit windows of the diner, not being too shy about watching them. Motioning with his cigarette, Billy asks, "Making friends?"

Steve glances up. "Shit," he says, spooked, and moves around the car. Billy smirks. "What room is it?"

"8," Billy replies, and Steve makes for it without a look back, not even checking if Billy's following. Billy takes one more puff on the cigarette, then flicks it off into the night, where it sits smoldering on the gravel.

Billy follows with hands in pockets, hunching his shoulders against the wind that's blowing his curls around. Steve is already at the door, and Billy tries not to smile.

Taking the key from his pocket, Billy asks, "You have to be somewhere?"

"You're really funny." Steve glances back across the road, towards the diner.

Billy doesn't bother. He doesn't have much shame about what they're doing here. It feels too fucking good to bother with something like shame. He's already had a lifetime of that, thanks. He turns the key in the door and pushes it open, gesturing for Steve to step inside. Like he's a gentleman.

Steve rolls his eyes and brushes past him. Billy snorts softly, then pulls the door shut behind them.

The room is awful. The motel is awful. Half the time, the water runs cold, and the other half it's orange with rust. The number of cockroaches Billy has killed here is greater than five. Steve goes to turn on the bathroom light, not the lamp by the bed—enough so that



they can see each other, but not whatever stains are in the room.

If Steve would just sack up and come closer to Chicago—but no. No, the paranoid fucker insists on this out-of-the-way shitty place where no one ever seems to check in except the two of them.

Billy shrugs out of his leather jacket, hanging it in the closet. Or trying to. The hanger snaps. Billy grabs the jacket before it can hit the ground.

“Real charming place, Steve,” he says, tugging on another hanger before trusting his jacket to it. It was an entire paycheck from the garage for that thing. It’s not going to spend the night on the goddamn ground. With the cockroaches and Christ knows what else.

“Gets the job done.”

Turning, Billy crosses his arms. “Yeah? That’s your priority? Getting the job done?”

Steve gets that look he does sometimes. Like he knows that he doesn’t quite understand what Billy’s saying, and he’s not sure he wants to, and he knows he’s probably being made fun of. Either he just brushes it off or he threatens to leave.

“I can always head back to Hawkins,” Steve says, moving towards the door.

Billy neatly intercepts him. He catches Steve’s wrist with his fingers, angling his body between Steve and the door.

“Why you always have to be so sensitive, Harrington?” Billy murmurs, stroking his thumb over Steve’s wrist bone.

“Sensitive? I’m sensitive?”

“Yeah,” Billy nods, face closer and closer to Steve’s.

Steve’s eyes go kind of hazy. They usually do, the closer Billy gets to him. It’s like the world around them shuts off. It’s flattering. It’s an insane power rush. To just get near someone and have them forget everything else.

If Steve wasn't so goddamn oblivious, he'd realize Billy felt the exact same way.

Billy stops with his face a few inches from Steve's. He's good at this. He's always just *known* how to do this. Flirt. Fuck. It doesn't bother him, taking his time, if he has to. Sometimes it's the best when you take things slow. Hard and fast has its allure, yeah, but you don't drive another person crazy if you pounce every single time.

And this makes Steve nuts. Steve is not good at waiting. He'll do it if Billy makes him, but his usual move is to just go for it. No finesse, no patience. Steve's face is completely naked, nothing hidden, everything bare. His eyes go to exactly what he wants. He's staring at Billy's mouth. He can't take his eyes away from it.

Because Billy's a tease—he's good at it, he knows he's good at it—he parts his lips, just barely, hardly anything at all.

It sets Steve off. He moves too fast for Billy to react, almost knocking him back with how hungry his mouth is. Before Billy can fall, Steve's hands are in his curls, taking fistfuls of them. Sometimes Billy wishes he'd kept his hair long—he wouldn't mind if Steve wanted to pull on his hair. Like it is now, though, Steve's got the perfect grip to control Billy's head, tilting it, twisting his whole body to bring Billy close.

He tastes like coffee. Bad, acidic coffee. Billy really could not give a shit. Steve's mouth is wet and maybe he can't wait for anything, but he knows how to kiss. He knows how to do a lot of things. That was a pleasant surprise.

Billy realizes he's already pulling Steve's shirt up his torso. He needs to slow down. Sure, they could go fast, and that would just mean multiple rounds instead of a single long one. That has its perks. But they're barely inside the door.

*What, you want to ask him about his day ?*

Billy takes Steve by the lapels of his jean jacket and shoves him back a step. Steve doesn't lose that dazed thing around his eyes. He tries to press forward—animal, instinctual—but Billy holds him in place with a small shake. When Steve realizes he's being told *no* , he stops, only

Billy doesn't give him time to get frustrated.

He yanks Steve's jacket over his shoulders. Steve makes a low noise. Billy looks him over, smiling crookedly. He slides his fingers inside the sleeves, pushing the jacket down Steve's arms, unhurried. Steve would just throw it off, but god damn it, Billy is going to make him wait. When the jacket falls to the ground, Billy strokes his fingers briefly over the back of Steve's hands.

Steve's just shaking his head a little as Billy pushes Steve's thin t-shirt up his body. His eyes basically radiate, *why are you doing this to me, you son of a bitch*. But affectionately.

Billy tosses the t-shirt aside, then starts in on Steve's pants. He *slowly* undoes the button. Almost squirming, Steve breathes, "Come on." Billy throws him a look, and Steve bites his lips. Irritated, but if that bulge in his jeans is any evidence, more turned on than ever.

Billy takes the top of Steve's jeans in one hand, and unzips them with the other, still taking his time, like it's difficult. Like what's inside is making the whole process twice as tough as it should be. He bites his lower lip, eyes wandering along Steve's chin, the few little hairs he missed shaving. Fucker's probably going to leave beard burn on his back.

Moving his hands beneath layers of fabric, Billy runs his hands over Steve's ass as he pushes his pants and underwear down. When his cock comes bobbing free, Steve curses, low, but Billy can't figure out what it is he's said. It's fine. He gets the gist. Going down on his knees, Billy removes one white sneaker, then the other, setting them carefully aside. Then he continues pulling down Steve's clothes, Steve putting a hand down on his head to balance himself as he steps out of his jeans and briefs. Balling everything up, Billy tosses it all aside, and sits back on his knees, taking in the sights.

Steve, naked except for his white socks, prick pointing up and to the left. He looks absolutely fucking ridiculous. He also looks like the hottest thing Billy has ever seen.

Billy bounces back up to his feet and walks past Steve, carelessly stripping out of his own clothes. He's kicked out of his loafers and

has his shirt off, in the middle of unbuckling his belt, when Steve says incredulously, “Really?”

Nonchalantly, Billy shrugs at him, shoving his pants down. He didn’t bother with drawers—hell, he usually doesn’t. Steve glances down at his white socks, incensed.

Naked, pleased as punch, Billy climbs onto the bed. On all fours, he looks over at Steve. “You gonna come over here and fuck me or what?”

That changes Steve’s tune. He tries to get over to the bed while tugging off a sock, but seems to remember something. He turns around, hopping, still trying to get that one sock off. Grabbing a plastic bag off the TV stand, he finally pitches the sock aside. He seems to be so pissed about it that he doesn’t bother with the other one, instead threatening, “I’m going to *wreck* you,” as he strides over to the bed.

“You promise?”

Steve climbs on behind him, and says, “So help me God, if it’s the last thing I do.”

Billy goes down on his elbows. “You better.” He closes his eyes, smiling a little to himself.

A man could get used to this. And he has.

## 2. Chapter 2

*[three months earlier]*

Steve's pretty damn sure it's gonna rain.

He can't stop checking the sky, can't stop pulling at his shirt where it's sticking to his body. It's muggy. He can only imagine how the kids must be feeling in those polyester robes. Though - they're not really *kids* anymore, are they? Today makes that official, Steve supposes. From up in the bleachers, he looks down on the sea of graduates in their matching caps and gowns and spots each one, shifting in their seats, craning their necks to catch each others' eyes and grinning from ear to ear.

Nah. They're still the kids.

It was a nice morning, but dark clouds had been rolling in since the audience started crowding into the stands. Steve caught some murmurings about moving the ceremony indoors at the last minute, but --

"Seriously, I swear it's about to pour," Steve whispers to Nancy, nudging her in the side. The principal's voice echoes around the football field, cracked and tinny from the shitty PA system set up on the stage.

Nancy sweeps the hair off the back of her neck, blows out a long breath. "I hope not," she says quietly, then flashes him a sly smile. "It would speed this up, though." Next to her, Jonathan glances up at the clouds, shifting his camera nervously on his lap.

On stage, Principal Coleman is waist-deep in a long, impassioned speech about the graduates' bright futures, about all the opportunities awaiting them out in the world. About making great strides, pursuing their goals, achieving their dreams. Following in the footsteps of generations before them, carving out paths to success for the generations to come. It's corny, but he seems to mean every word.

There's a lump in Steve's throat. He swallows it down and tries to

reset his focus - today isn't about him. Coleman's speech is full of hope and promise, and all the kids filling those rows of rickety fold-out seats deserve to feel that. But some of these kids will never leave Hawkins, he knows. Some of them will flounder aimlessly without the guidance and structure of high school keeping them on track. They might do a couple years of community college before falling back on something comfortable and dead-end. They might end up watching their friends sprint after their passions while they cheer from the sidelines. Because life is just like that. Not everyone can win. Hell, not everyone can even play. It helps to know what you want and Steve - he never has. Still doesn't. So here he is, eternally benched.

Not that this is about him.

By the time the principal finishes his speech, the sky has gotten several shades darker and the crowd - graduate and audience alike - is getting restless. Before he steps away from the podium, he clears his throat and says, "It seems the weather is not on our side today, so we're going to try to get through this as quickly as we can. We ask that you save your applause to the end, thank you."

The graduates rise as one, shuffling away from their seats row-by-row to file into an orderly line near the stage. Then a woman with tightly bound hair and startlingly wide shoulders steps up to the microphone and says, "Patricia Ableman."

Steve remembers that feeling, how crossing the stage felt like walking over a bridge to his brand new life. Things would be different now, he told himself. He could start fresh, in a place where bad dreams and bad dates and bad grades couldn't touch him. Four years later, he's still wondering when he's going to reach the other side.

A sudden commotion to his right breaks him out of his thoughts. Jonathan, Mrs. Byers, and Chief Hopper are all on their feet even before he hears it, loud and clear and resounding - "William Byers." Despite the principal's request, they form a three-person chorus of cheers, cupping their mouths and whooping down at poor Will, whose blush is visible all the way up in the stands.

Steve watches Will duck his head sheepishly behind his hair,

receiving his diploma and shaking the hands of the faculty with his shoulders hunched. It's too much attention for him, Steve knows that, and he suspects the cheer squad at his side knows it too, but still they keep on, hooting and hollering and stomping their feet. Jonathan shouts encouragement even as he snaps pictures. There are eyes on them from every direction, but they don't stop until Will is completely off the stage.

He can't blame them. There was a time when it seemed like this day would never come.

Moments later, he feels a drop of water hit his cheek. What's about to happen seems to dawn on everyone around him at the same time.

It starts slow, nothing more than a trickle, and names keep being called out, and bodies keep crossing the stage, but it's only a matter of time. It's sprinkling by the time Dustin's name is called, and Steve can't help but let out a single loud whoop as Dustin takes his moment, turning toward the crowd and pumping his fists in the air, shimmying across the stage in a dance that makes all his classmates laugh before he starts shaking hands.

A couple names later, the sky opens up.

"Please move into the gymnasium!" Steve hears a new voice call, but it's staticky and broken and almost inaudible over the rain. All hopes of continuing the ceremony lost, people start scattering in all directions. Half the students dash toward the school while the other half simply run around the field with their arms out, heads tilted back to taste the chaos pouring from the sky.

Steve locks his eyes on Nancy's back and follows her lead as she tugs Jonathan by the hand toward the open gymnasium doors. People flood inside in a steady stream, trying not to slip on the wet floor. Mostly everyone is laughing - the rain doesn't seem to have spoiled the day at all.

It takes some time, but eventually groups start to form as people find each other, students meeting up with their friends, their families. Nancy scopes out a spot in the corner and together they wave everybody down. The kids are obviously psyched, yelling animatedly

to each other all at once. Steve leans against the wall watching, smiling, laughing along. He's happy for them, and he has to admit that was exciting, but he still feels - off. A little hollow, in a way he wasn't expecting.

He reaches up to comb the wet hair off his forehead with his fingers. Wrings out his shirt right onto the lacquered floor. He looks down at the puddle, notices gratefully that somehow, he managed to keep his shoes pretty dry.

When he looks back up, his chest goes tight. A chill rushes down his spine.

Against the adjoining wall, practically mirroring his own posture, is Billy Hargrove. Next to him are two people Steve assumes are Billy's parents, and it all makes sense but for some reason Steve never even considered he might be here.

Billy, in this setting - it's familiar enough to stun him. The faint shadow of distaste on his face, the restless impatience in the shift of his shoulders, the way he tosses and twirls his keys, just to keep his hands busy. That same uneasy sensation passes through Steve, like time stopped four years ago but only for him, dooming him to be haunted by the same ghosts for eternity.

He watches Billy shake the moisture from his curls, and even that's familiar, although now it's rain and not sweat. His hair's shorter, too. And what's more, Billy's dressed so conservatively - for his standards, anyway. In this place that has seen so much of his bare body, the gray henley and black pants he's wearing may as well be a suit.

When Max walks up to him, it's nothing like it used to be. Billy gives her his full attention. Steve can't hear what he and Max are talking about but he watches Billy smirk, watches Max's answering smile. Then Billy reaches out and swats at the brim of Max's cap hard enough to send it tumbling to the ground.

Heat flares through Steve. Of course he'd do that. What was he expecting? Time really has stopped, and Billy's the same asshole he ever was. Why the fuck did he even come to this?



Max scoops her cap off the ground with one hand and punches Billy in the arm with the other and Billy - laughs. It's not a laugh Steve's ever seen, though. It's not mean. Steve doesn't know what to make of it. He watches Billy reach up to ruffle Max's hair - she's just as tall as he is now - before snatching the cap from her and placing it gingerly back on her head with both hands. He wiggles it into place, smooths down the sides, and flicks the tassel. Steve can't tear his eyes away from any of it.

"Can you believe this?" Dustin shouts, practically in Steve's face, so that he has no choice but to look away. Thunder booms above them, just louder than the sound of the torrent crashing down on the metal roof of the gym. "It's awesome! It's like *The Long Rain* and we're all in the Sun Dome. Best graduation ever!"

"Yeah," Steve laughs, catching the reference. Ray Bradbury - he read that one not too long ago. The stack of old sci-fi magazines Dustin gave him has been keeping him company on plenty of sleepless nights. He's not sure why, but reading all those horror stories - it helps. Makes his own seem less real. "Better not look up, you might drown."

Dustin laughs and darts away, and despite his own advice, Steve looks up. Billy's looking right at him. Suddenly he can't breathe. So he was right - he must be drowning after all.

Again he's reminded of high school, because it feels like a game of chicken, neither one willing to be the first to turn away. Steve pulls off the wall, no plan in mind. His feet carry him toward unknown territory, nervous and desperately curious, like the adventurers in the story.

Halfway there, the man who is probably Billy's dad steps into his path, tugging Billy away from the wall by his arm and clapping him hard on the back.

"My son here's a city boy, now," he bellows, seemingly to anyone that will listen. His hand clamps down on Billy's shoulder. "Got himself a hoity-toity office job selling insurance to a bunch of suckers. Isn't that right, boy?"

"That's right," Billy says through clenched teeth. His smile looks much more like the grimace of Steve's memories now.

His dad's grin, however, seems obnoxiously genuine. "What's it, the 45th floor?"

"48th," Billy corrects him, voice flat. He glances at Steve, just for a second.

"The 48th floor! I tell you, Sue and I weren't sure this one was going to make it, but he's just like his old man - when he wants something, he doesn't stop 'til he gets it. Never saw him as an executive type, but we're proud as hell. Aren't we, honey?"

The red-haired woman at his side matches her husband's smile and nods. "He's set a great example for his sister," she says, gesturing to Max.

"Just takes a little discipline," his dad says.

Billy twists, shrugging out of his dad's grip. "Excuse me," he says, face stony, and moves quickly through the crowd, past Steve, toward the doors leading outside. Into the storm.

Steve comes back to himself, lets out a slow breath. He's an island, standing alone in a sea of people. On instinct, he turns toward Nancy, hoping she caught all that. Hoping she feels as unbalanced as he does. Hoping he can say, *what the fuck, right?*, and she'll laugh and shake her head and something, *anything* will make sense again.

But she's caught up in conversation with Jonathan - of course - and when she finally looks over at him, all she says is, "Should we start rounding everybody up?"

"I -" Steve says, glancing toward the exit. "I'll be right back."

If he didn't have a plan before, he has even less of one now. He swings one of the metal double doors open and pokes his head out, but doesn't see much of anything but the heavy downpour falling in sheets.

Hell, he's already soaked.

He jogs along the side of the building, staying close to the wall so as to be protected by the overhang of the roof. When he rounds the corner, he pulls up short in the muddy grass. There's Billy, standing in front of another entrance, smoking underneath a large awning, his back to Steve.

And really, Steve has no choice. Life doesn't give you many opportunities to confront your ghosts. Maybe, he thinks, it'll help him cross the damn bridge.

"Long time no see," he says, stepping up onto the stoop.

Billy whips around, takes a step backwards. Blows out smoke, hard and heavy through his nose. Now that, Steve remembers.

"Fuck, Harrington. That's what you do when you haven't seen someone in a long time?"

"Sorry. It was getting a little cramped in there."

"You're telling me," Billy says, giving him a blatant once-over that he can practically feel, all the way down to his bones. Now that he's there, he's not sure what to say. After a moment of deliberation, Billy reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a somewhat crumpled pack of cigarettes. He flicks it so that one pops out through a hole in the top, holds it out in offering.

"Sure, thanks." Steve's not a smoker, normally, but - when in Rome. As soon as it's settled between his lips, Billy pulls out a Zippo and reaches out to light it for him, cupping the flame with his free hand.

He takes as deep of a drag as he can manage. The burn helps distract him from how goddamn bizarre everything is. The kids, the storm, and now this. Smoke twirls around his words when he speaks. "Our graduation wasn't half this much of a shitshow."

"I wouldn't know," Billy says, looking off.

"Oh, yeah, that's right." It all comes back in an instant. How anxious he'd been all morning, knowing he'd have to sit next to Billy for the whole ceremony. The confusing mixture of relief and concern he'd felt when that chair stayed empty. It was just like Billy, Steve thought

at the time, to ditch his own graduation.

The wind changes, just then, blowing rain into the relative safety of their little alcove. They both step back as one, to lean up against the door. It's the closest Steve's been to Billy in years. He smells exactly the same as he used to.

"Do you regret not showing up?" Steve asks, because it's better than just standing there, breathing in Billy's scent, strangely comforting as it may be.

"I regret a lot of things, Harrington. But that?" Billy taps his cigarette, shakes his head. "Considering getting rained out was the most thrilling part of today's festivities, I'm gonna go with no. I was pretty focused on getting my diploma and getting the hell outta here."

"Yeah, Chicago, huh?" Steve says. Doesn't bother acting like he hadn't heard. He holds his breath, but Billy just looks at him - unbothered, a little challenging. "Sounds like you're doing alright for yourself."

"I get by," Billy says, takes another drag. "What about you - I see you're still babysitting that pack of nerds. You do anything these days but hang out with a bunch of kids?"

Steve's heartbeat kicks up. He kinda hates Billy in that moment. Hates that after all these years, he can still hit on Steve's deepest insecurities with pinpoint accuracy. He was always so transparent to Billy. Guess that hasn't changed. He thinks about lying, but, fuck it. Billy would probably see right through that, too.

"Nah, I, uh - my folks got me a job at their club after high school," he says, shrugging. He can't quite meet Billy's eyes for this, starts picking at some chipping paint in the door. It feels very much like admitting defeat in a game he didn't even know they were playing. Especially after what he'd overheard in the gym. Feels like Billy shoving past him and heading straight for the net. "It's nothing swanky, but it's - something. At least I don't have to wear a suit."

Billy snorts. "Do I seem like the type to wear a suit?"

“Oh, I just assumed, after your dad said--”

“Damn, all these years and you still believe everything you hear, huh. Some things never change,” Billy says, cigarette flopping between his lips, ash crumbling from the tip. The temptation to swat the damn thing out of his mouth is almost overwhelming.

The way Billy’s looking at him, from just a step away, makes Steve feel totally exposed. Like Billy knows exactly how fucked up and left behind he feels. Like he’s savoring it. Steve narrows his eyes and says, a little sharp, “So what *are* you doing?”

Billy pinches his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, taking another long pull. He licks over his bottom lip - Steve tries not to be bowled over by the sense of *deja vu*. A long moment passes before Billy says, “Aren’t we supposed to wait until the reunion to ask each other that kinda shit?”

Steve tilts his head, smirks. “You asked me first.”

To Steve’s surprise, Billy smiles. It’s small, but unmistakable. He’s looking down, watching himself scrape some mud from his shoe onto the cement, but he’s definitely smiling. Maybe it’s just to himself. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not what my dad thinks I’m doing, and it’s not what he wants, but,” he shrugs, looks back up to meet Steve’s eyes again. “It works for me.”

And it’s enough. Billy’s right - it doesn’t really matter. The point is, he’s moved on. He’s obviously figured out who he is. Even if Steve hasn’t. Billy used to stalk around sparking like a live wire, energy popping off him, dangerous and uncontrolled. Now, as they huddle quietly under the awning, listening to the rain, he seems - grounded. It doesn’t bother Steve nearly as much as he thought it would.

“You look good, Billy,” he says. It just kinda comes out. Billy’s eyes widen for a moment, then his brow furrows suspiciously. Steve fumbles, adding, “I mean, fuck, I dunno. You seem -” Less pissed off? Less like a bomb primed to explode? - “...happier. Gotta admit, you were kind of a mess back then.”

“Speak for yourself, Harrington,” Billy says, gesturing toward him

with his chin. “Anyway, turns out escaping purgatory does wonders for a guy’s complexion. You oughta try it.”

“If Hawkins is such a hellhole, and you hate graduations so much, why are you even here?” Steve asks.

Billy’s expression turns serious. “I didn’t give a shit. Max gives a shit.”

Huh. While Steve takes that in, a flash of lightning streaks through the sky. “We should probably head back,” he says, but it’s quiet, drowned out by a deafening crack of thunder.

“What?” Billy asks, glancing down at Steve’s mouth, like it’ll help him hear better.

Steve leans in, speaks nearer to Billy’s ear. “I said, we - er. I should probably get back in there.”

He can feel the warmth of Billy’s sigh on his neck. It makes him shiver.

“Yeah, alright,” Billy says, flicking his cigarette into the wet grass. Steve drops his onto the ground, crushes it under his heel.

The gym is only about half as full as it was when Steve left. The various parents seem to have gone, the rest of the group congregating in a tight, anxious circle. Half the kids have slipped out of their wet robes. They turn as one as Steve walks up, Billy trailing behind, but keeping his distance.

For some reason, he can’t meet Nancy’s eyes when she says, “There you are. We thought you might’ve left.”

“Just getting some air,” he says, moving to stand next to her.

“Well, I think we’re all ready. Right, guys?” Nancy says, looking over the group.

Mike speaks up, says, “I’m starving,” at the same time that Dustin says, “Hell yeah, let’s do this.”

Just then, Max gasps. Steve's head snaps over to look at her, suddenly worried, but her grin is a mile wide. Stepping out of the group, she bounds over to Billy, who's standing off to the side with his hands buried in his front pockets. "You should come with us!" she says.

"Come with you where?" Billy asks, eyeing her.

"We're going out for dinner to celebrate, you should totally come," she says.

Billy shuffles, angling away from the view of the rest of the group, his shoulders rising up practically to his ears. His voice is low and gruff when he says, "I don't know. I think I'm gonna head back."

Max reaches out, shoves at him, hard. "Come on. You're never in town. You never visit. It's my graduation! Come with."

And Steve, inexplicably, finds himself hoping Billy will agree. The other chatter in the noisy gym fades away as he zeroes in on Billy, waiting for his reply. He doesn't know why, it's just that things feel - unfinished. Like if Billy says no, Steve will never, ever cross that bridge into the rest of his life.

Billy's gaze flickers to Steve, then up to the ceiling, then back to Max. He takes a deep breath and says, finally, "Fine. Sure."

"Awesome," Max says, then turns to start marching toward the door, shouting over her shoulder, "I call shotgun!"

~\*~

With the power of hindsight, Billy can recognize that the angry, knotted thing he carried around about Steve Harrington in high school was a crush. The fact that no one else picked up on it just confirms the stupidity of the people who live in Hawkins. It wouldn't have been anymore obvious if Billy had walked around holding a sign that said 'Queer for Harrington.'

There had been guys in California that he felt sort of a spark for, but he'd responded to that by hitting them in the face. He hadn't wanted to admit then what it was, so he sure as hell was not going to admit anything about stupid, ridiculous Steve Harrington.

But having a 13-year-old with a baseball bat nearly take off your nuts breaks through a lot of barriers.

After that whole fucking disaster, Billy kept his distance from that crew. He smartened up about Max, he stopped being such a showboat at school, he kept from being hit (as much). And he left Steve Harrington alone.

Because yes, whatever this thing was inside, Billy recognized that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't Steve's fault. And maybe—just *maybe*—pounding the guy's face to mush had probably more to do with trying to destroy something in himself that he didn't like.

Not to get fucking philosophical about it.

Getting out of Hawkins helped even more than being tranqed like an old family pet. With distance from this place, from his father, meeting people, getting a job he liked—things started to not be so shitty. They were actually the opposite. Things were pretty goddamn good.

And so that thing he felt inside about guys, that stopped being a thing to hate about himself. It stopped being a thing he wanted to tear out with claws. It was just another piece.

If he ever thought about Hawkins, and Steve Harrington came to mind, Billy would just think to himself, *yeah, I wanted him. Thank God those years are over*. Then he'd move onto better things, like what design he was going to put on that Camaro coming into the garage.

Only now he's here in Hawkins, which is obnoxious, and he's sitting at the same table as Steve Harrington.

Who looks hot as hell.

Billy has to keep himself from shaking his head a little. Every time he looks over at Steve, he almost gets a little angry at how the man



somehow got more attractive.

Not that Steve Harrington is exactly the most handsome man that's ever lived. He's got a weird nose and his face doesn't quite work and Jesus Christ, buddy, you're really still that obsessed with your hair?

But that weird nose also makes his face interesting, and the last few years have leaned down his cheeks in a way that's almost unhealthy, and all that hair would probably be nice to hold onto if Billy was on his back. So yeah, the asshole got pretty fuckable.

It's something about his eyes too. He looks sad. That should come as no surprise. He's stuck in Hawkins. Every person Billy's seen who stayed here has that defeated look to them. It makes Steve look older. Kind of tragic.

So yeah, the thought of tearing the man's clothes off with his teeth has occurred to Billy. It helps that Steve keeps sneaking little glances at him, like he can't help himself.

They're sitting around a large table at Gino's New York Pizzeria. There's never been a Gino. No one in this restaurant has ever been to New York, let alone Italy. After three years of living in Chicago, Billy can be kind of a snob about pizza. And this pizza is the fucking worst. Orange with grease and soggy crust. He ate one slice to not look like a prick, but that's about as much as he can manage.

The kids are plowing through it like no tomorrow. They don't know any better. This is the only pizza in Hawkins. This is the only pizza they've ever had. The poor bastards.

Max almost looks like a feral animal with how fast she's eating. A little disgusted, a little impressed, Billy asks, "Do you chew your food?" She turns and bares her open mouth at him. He puts a hand to the side of her face and pushes her away. Kids are gross.

Steve's looking again.

Billy doesn't know if it's because he doesn't remember Billy treating Max with anything but contempt, or for other reasons. Probably the former. If it was for other reasons...

Hoping too much. It's fine. Billy will be back on the road as soon as this bullshit is over. He came for Max, and once her night is done, he's gone. It doesn't bother him that he won't get home until past sunup. Better than waking up here.

"I'm coming to stay with you next month," Max says.

Billy raises a brow. "Says who?"

"Says me."

"Fuck no."

"Fine. I'll sleep on the street."

"What do you want to come to Chicago for?"

"I want to look at Northwestern."

"You didn't get into Northwestern."

"No, I didn't apply for Northwestern. I was thinking maybe I'd do my year at Indiana State, then transfer over. So can I stay with you for a few days?"

Billy shrugs. "If you want." He realizes that most of the table has watched this exchange. Looking at him like he's a zoo exhibit. Like he's still the same ballistic loser he was in high school. Not able to help himself, Billy looks around at the table and asks, "Which of you nerds are staying and which are getting out?"

Just from their reactions, he can tell which ones. He doesn't know their names, but he can read their future by their guilt, their disappointment.

"I'm getting my bachelor's in science at State," says the curly haired one with the teeth. He holds up his half empty plastic cup of Coke. "Curiosity door, bitches!"

When the hooting quiets down, the slender one with the big dark eyes says bashfully, "I'm going to Columbia."

The way he casts his eyes over Billy is familiar and fucking weird. It's strange to have a 17-year-old look at you that way. Steve's looking at him the same way, which is far more comfortable. Unexpected, but comfortable.

Lucas looks miserable. He's the only one whose name Billy knows, because Max dated him for a few years, but she's broken up with him, now that she's going to school and he's not. The other kid, the pale one, shrugs and says far too casually, "Going on a road trip with my girlfriend. We'll see what happens."

Everyone seems to know what that means and is conspicuously quiet about it. Billy glances around at them, then decides he really doesn't care. He nods towards the other two people his age. "You two live up in Indianapolis, right?"

The girl—Nancy? Is that her name?—nods, looking at Billy warily. She's had her hand on the inside of her boyfriend's thigh the whole time, like she's trying to make sure everyone knows whose territory he is. Billy's never had the opportunity to do that in public with anyone. Girls, maybe, but not anyone he actually wanted to belong to.

"I'm going to school," Nancy says. "Jonathan is a photographer for *The Indianapolis Star*."

Billy nods, as if he's impressed. He has to care about someone to be impressed.

"And what is it that you're doing again?" Steve asks.

He's already asked. He's looking at Billy head on, but not with that slightly repelled expression everyone has when their eyes turn to Billy. No, Steve's...focused.

Billy gives it a moment, then puts on his best, most charming grin. "Didn't you hear? I sell insurance."

The kid going on the road trip with his girlfriend lets out a derisive bark, then sort of quickly puts his head down. Billy glances at him, a little amused, but he's more interested in Steve's reaction. Steve's

smiling back, like he's in on the joke.

Billy holds his eyes a moment too long, until he sees uncertainty flicker across Steve's face. Then Billy looks away. He can't help it. He likes to push until people push back.

Because some things—they just never change.

The rain still hasn't stopped when it's time to leave. Billy blows out a breath. The weather probably means the trip will end up being close to seven hours, if he doesn't want to kill himself on the back roads. Awesome.

The kids are all going to the pale boy's place. They're playing some Satanic board game—the curly haired kid had spent nearly a full minute chanting, "Old time's sake! Old time's sake!" before the others agreed, even though it was obvious they all wanted to. Lucas way too casually offered to drive Max, and she shrugged, like, sure buddy.

Billy wraps an arm around her shoulder, drawing her in for a quick hug. "Give me a call to let me know when you're coming to see me. I need a chance to move all spank bank material off the couch."

"You're disgusting," Max replies, but she buries her head into his shoulder a moment. They had a rocky start, yeah, but living in that house together for a few years—people get real close, real quick. Max shoves away from him. "Don't crash your car, homo."

"Don't crash Lucas' car giving him road head," Billy responds.

Max casts him an absolutely revolted look, flipping him off as she goes out the door.

Billy grins to himself, then gets the new pack of cigarettes from his back pocket. He stopped between the school and here, because he might not be able to drink away the memories of Hawkins while he's stuck here, but he can damn well smoke his lungs raw. And Harrington took the last cigarette in the old pack.

*Which you offered him, you flirty fuck .*

Speaking of Harrington, he's the only other one left inside. He's sort

of hanging back, hands in his pockets, seeming unsure what he wants. Or maybe that's projecting—it could just be that he doesn't want to go outside and fuck up his hair in the rain.

Can't hurt.

Billy nods outside. "I'm gonna have a smoke, see if this shit calms down before taking off. You coming?"

Nonchalantly, Steve shrugs. "Yeah, okay."

They duck outside, out under the ledge at the front of the pizzeria. It's still pissing rain. No way this stops any time soon. Billy figures he'll give it another smoke, then get behind the wheel.

This time, he puts two cigarettes into his mouth, sheltering them with his hand as he lights up. He breathes in, almost dizzy with nicotine and pure cancerous goodness, then plucks one out. He passes it to Steve, because he just really likes the idea of something that's been on his lips in Steve's mouth.

Steve takes it, and Billy watches from his peripheral vision. Steve looks down at the cigarette, then deliberately puts it up to his mouth. He smokes the way women will, trapped in the V of index and middle finger. Billy always pinches it between thumb and forefinger. It just looks cooler.

They smoke in silence for a few beats, then Billy says, "You got any plans to leave here, or are you going to stay here until you die?"

Steve's shoulders rise and fall. It's the most defeated thing Billy's seen him do yet. "They'll bury me out where the monsters can eat me."

"What?"

"Nothing." Steve coughs, clearly unused to smoking, and says, "Just reading some things. I don't know."

"You read?"

"Do *you* ?" Steve retorts.

“I do.”

“Hustler doesn’t count.”

“Hustler is for breeders.”

“What?”

“What?” Billy echoes innocently. Push, push back.

Steve’s looking at him with narrowed eyes. He clears his throat again, then leans back against the wall. “So what did you say you do in Chicago?”

It’s the third time he’s asked. Billy doesn’t know why Steve’s so keen on the question. But it doesn’t hurt to play along. Billy turns a little, more towards Steve, resting against the wall. “What do you think I do?”

Without skipping a beat, Steve says, “I always figured it was 50/50. Either convict or male prostitute.”

Billy’s lips curl into a grin. The answer amuses him to no end. “Male prostitute, huh?”

“You used to dress like one.”

“You sure it’s not because of all those times we were in the shower together, and you thought I should put my best attribute to use?”

“It would have been your only good attribute.”

Billy sees Steve realize what he’s just said. That he’s pretty much admitted he’s looked at Billy’s cock, and wasn’t let down by what he saw. Billy says absolutely nothing. Let Steve stew on that for a second.

Steve is floundering, and Billy loves it. He squeezes his eyes shut, mouth opening, and Billy knows that the guy is going to stammer and deny and it would be a joy to watch.

Instead, Billy rescues him. He knows that him being the better man

will irritate the living shit out of Steve. Resting his shoulders against the wall, looking out at the empty street instead of Steve, Billy says, “I do custom paint jobs on cars. I started out just working in the garage doing grunt work, but after I’d been around for awhile, I showed the boss some of my sketches, he let me at a couple of simple things, and once he saw that I was good at it, everything worked out.”

Steve’s face is all screwed up. “Sorry—you draw?”

He sounds so incredulous. Billy can’t help but be a bit insulted. “Yeah. I’m good at something. Put your eyes back in your goddamn head.”

“I didn’t...sorry.”

Billy shrugs. He’s coming near to the end of his cigarette. He should get on the road soon, and forget that Steve Harrington exists.

“So—what, you do those asshole panel vans that has some chick in a fur bikini, riding a polar bear?”

“Haven’t done that yet. I did do some guy’s girlfriend as a valkyrie on a narwhal.”

“What’s a narwhal?”

“It’s—” Billy motions, like something’s coming off his forehead. “A whale that has a horn sticking out of its head. Like a unicorn dolphin.”

“What, for real?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. Sounds made up.”

“Yeah, but the world’s weird.”

Steve suddenly starts laughing. It’s the first time since Billy’s been back that Steve doesn’t look like sad is the layer under everything. Billy just watches him. A bit charmed, honestly. That face of Steve’s,

the one that shouldn't work, but does, looks pretty good when he's laughing.

Steve realizes Billy's watching him, and stifles his laughter. He looks to Billy, and Billy doesn't look away. Billy knows how to hold a gaze. He waits to see if Steve does.

And Steve looks too long.

When he does look away, Billy starts to seriously contemplate the situation. He crushed pretty hard on Steve in high school, regardless of whether he could admit it or not. And sometimes there were times in the shower when he thought things that would make him smash his head against a wall afterwards. Sometimes those things he thought were Steve wanting him. It was a fantasy, one of those big, dark, forbidden fantasies, the kind that are delicious and awful because they can't ever happen.

Nonetheless, Steve was trying to approach him at grad. Steve is the one who hung around when all the people he ostensibly likes were clearing out for the night. Steve is the one holding a gaze, even if he gets all skittish about it. Even if he can't admit to himself what he's doing.

Billy spent a long time not willing to admit what he wanted. He can recognize it in other people.

Huh. Pleasant surprise.

"So," Billy says, "what do you do for fun?"

Steve shakes his head, like it doesn't matter. "Not much. About what you'd expect."

"You don't have any hobbies? Any outlets?"

"Outlet, Jesus. You get a thesaurus when you move to Chicago?"

"Yeah, they were handing them out to blondes with big dicks. What do you do that other people don't? I draw. Max, she plays video games. My dad, he thinks of new and more interesting ways to be an asshole. What have you got?"



Steve is only halfway through his cigarette. He looks down at it, jittering his leg a little. Yeah, he's got something. He glances at Billy.

With his most charming smile, Billy nearly purrs, "Come on, Harrington."

Letting out the most put-upon sigh, Steve says, "The past while...I've been reading."

"Oh, so you do read?"

"Fuck off, man."

"So, you've been reading."

"These...nerdy magazines Dustin has around." He's saying it derisively, but that's just to protect himself. Easily spotted. Part of being a former bully is recognizing what people feel most vulnerable about. "Science fiction, fantasy stuff. Short stories mostly. A lot of it is really shitty, but there are some that...remind me of things. Or get me out of here. At least until the end of the story. Once I got through all the magazines he'd been hoarding, I got a library card—don't look at me like that."

Billy says honestly, "My face hasn't changed since you started talking."

Steve seems suspicious, but he doesn't stop talking. "I've been reading all the stuff that the library has. Arthur C. Clarke, Olaf Stapleton, J. G. Ballard—whatever I can get my hands on. And I..." He trails off at that.

Billy waits a few seconds before realizing that Steve's not going to continue. "Cool. Never really been my thing, but whatever, if you like it. You ever think about writing?"

Steve's head shoots up. He's actually startled. Well, shit.

"Really," Billy says. He would *not* have called that one.

"I don't know, I've...been messing around with some stuff. It's not any good, it's just...it's better than doing nothing."

Billy knows what he means by that. Staying in Hawkins is the nothing.

"I hear you. Well, you ever get anything together, I'd read it."

"Bullshit you would."

"I told you. I read. You want to think of me as the same guy I was in high school, go ahead, but sorry—he and his mullet are dead and buried. Ashes to ashes." Billy flicks his cigarette out into the rain. "Dust to dust."

Putting his hands in his pockets, he leans on his side against the wall, so that he's directly facing Steve. No pretending his interest is anywhere else.

Steve knows he's being looked at. It's written in how tight his whole body's gotten. Except he's not taking off. He's uncomfortable, obviously, but it's not greater than his interest. Does he even know what it is he's wanting right now? Billy doesn't push anything this time. He just...waits.

"You're heading back to Chicago?" Steve says, his voice low.

"Mhm. Nothing here. Is there?"

"Nope. Not a goddamn thing."

"Oh, I don't know. Some things—they're not that bad to look at."

Steve's running his teeth over his lower lip. Billy figures he might either get punched or have Steve say an abrupt goodnight.

"You seeing anyone up in Chicago?" Steve asks.

Hot damn. "Nobody. Just haven't met the right...person, I guess."

"You sure you don't just drive them off?"

"With what I can do? I've never had anybody run."

"You've got a lot of confidence in yourself."

“What, you want me to produce references?” Raising his shoulders, Billy murmurs, “What about you?”

“What, like, do I have confidence in my prowess, or—?”

Laughing, Billy says, “No—are you seeing anyone?”

“Me? No.”

Steve looks to Billy again. Billy knows if he made an explicit move right now—say, tried to slip his tongue inside Steve’s mouth—Steve would just startle and that would be the ball game.

“Pity,” Billy says, holding Steve’s eyes. “I’m sure you’ve got plenty of reason to be confident.”

He reaches into his inside pocket as Steve snorts. “Yeah, whatever.”

Billy takes out the crumpled, empty cigarette pack and a worn-down nub of a pencil. He rips the front off the cigarette pack and scrawls his number onto it. “I’ve gotta take off, but you should let me know if you ever want me to read something. Because, yeah, I read.” He holds the little piece of thin cardboard out to Steve.

Steve studies it with a combination of disbelief and queasiness. “What’s that?”

With an eye roll, Billy slaps it against Steve’s chest. Steve reaches up to take it, and for a second, Steve’s fingertips graze across the back of Billy’s hands. His eyes look huge in the dark.

“Seriously, Harrington,” Billy says. “A guy’s never given you his number before?”

Before Steve can reply, Billy walks away, hopping down the two steps, out into the pouring rain.

He doesn’t bother trying to shield himself from it. Let Steve get a good long look at him. At the very least, Billy’s leaving here on his own terms, and he’s pretty sure he looks good soaking wet. If Steve wants to think about pulling these wet clothes off him, hey, that’s just a bonus.

Billy's almost to the car when Steve suddenly says loudly, "Chicago's too far away."

Billy has to put up a hand to be able to see. That he'll concede. Steve's standing only an inch or two in from the rain, looking at Billy like he has no idea what he's doing, or why. That's fine. It's a start.

"I'll meet you halfway. What about that?"

Steve doesn't say anything. He just stands there with his mouth half open.

With a shrug, Billy says, "Think about it."

He gets his keys and unlocks the car, slipping inside. Jesus, he's going to be wet all the way to Illinois. First thing's first, though. He has to make an exit.

Turning on the lights, Billy catches Steve in their glare. A solitary, confused, interested figure. That little piece of paper clutched in his hand.

With a grin, Billy turns the engine over, bringing it to a roar. He lifts his fingers in farewell, taking one more look at that ridiculous, attractive face, before screeching the car backwards and out into the downpour.

Unexpected. But hey, he gave Steve Harrington his number. Whether he calls or not? Out of Billy's hands. At least he'll have the knowledge that he had the guts to make the move, repudiating everything about himself that he was in this town.

When he passes the 'You're Now Leaving Hawkins, Come Back Soon!' sign, Billy gives it an emphatic middle finger.

Two weeks later, when he gets the call, Billy's surprised.

And not. After all, he's only been waiting for Steve to call him since the day they met.

"Meet you halfway?" says the voice on the other end.

Grinning, the cat that got the canary, Billy says, “Meet you halfway.”

### 3. Chapter 3

If it wasn't for the man four doors down, standing on the balcony puffing on a cigar, Steve would already be on him.

Probably.

As it is, he's already reached out to run a hand down Billy's forearm, curl a finger into his cuff, as Billy works the key into the rusty lock. The wait this time has been excruciating. This is all he's been able to think about and he can't keep his hands to himself, has to bite his lip to stop from smiling. Billy side-eyes him as he turns the key, one eyebrow raised. Steve knows he's giving away too much already - they're not even in the fucking *room* yet but - he feels good. It's been a good few days.

When the door creaks open, Steve pushes past him, immediately turning to walk backwards into the room. He doesn't want to take his eyes off Billy, and why should he? Billy came dressed for this, like he always does. His collarbones are just visible under his v-neck, between the opening of his leather jacket, and Steve knows that's for him. His eyes are so damn bright when he turns them on Steve and it feels like that's just for him, too, though of course they're just - like that. They've always been like that.

"You on a tight schedule?" Billy says, looking him over. He's just standing in front of the closed door, not moving, not coming closer. Steve wants him closer. So he strides forward, crowding him instead, slipping his hands into either side of Billy's jacket and laying them flat on his lower back, over his shirt. It's warm. Billy's always so warm.

"Yeah," he says, against Billy's jaw. He nibbles his way down to Billy's chin, mutters against his lips, "I've got yoga class in an hour."

Billy scoffs. "I never should've told you about that," he says quietly, before resigning himself to Steve's kiss, to the insistent press of Steve's body. He brings a hand up to hold the back of Steve's neck, thumb stroking along the ridge of his ear. Makes a small noise when Steve bites down on his lower lip and tugs that has Steve feeling like

he's not the only one giving himself away.

Moments later, Steve feels the drag of Billy's palm over his cheek, two fingers insinuating themselves between their kiss, pressing against Steve's lips. He sets his other hand on Steve's chest. Steve stubbornly presses against it.

"You mind if I get my jacket off?" he says, eyes so fucking blue even in the dim room, and Steve *wants* him. Why should he hold back, even for a second? He wants so few things these days.

Steve's lips part, chin tilting up just a fraction to take Billy's fingertips between his teeth. He bites down softly, licks against the pads of them. Billy shudders so hard, Steve can see his shoulders quake.

Billy's staring at his own fingers as he presses in, against Steve's tongue, just for a second. He pulls them out damp, wetting Steve's lower lip in the process. Then he blinks, seems to shake himself. "You're a regular porn star tonight," he says, but it's heavy with interest, like the idea doesn't bother him at all.

"I'm sure you'd know," Steve says, smiling.

"Like you wouldn't. I'm pretty sure half your moves come from porn."

"Me?" Steve says, eyes wide and jaw dropped in mock offense. "Oh no, that's all natural talent, babe." He dips in for a hard, quick kiss, flicking Billy's upper lip with his tongue when he pulls away. Just for good measure.

He's feeling confident tonight.

He extracts one hand from Billy's jacket, pats at the pocket of his own without thinking. Pride and embarrassment course through him at the same time. He's not even sure why he brought it. It just seemed - important.

Billy's eyes track Steve's movement, flicking down to the hand at his pocket. Steve quickly pulls it away, slides it up Billy's chest instead. But Billy doesn't miss anything.

“You bring me a gift, Harrington? You didn’t have to do that, you already bring plenty to the table.” Billy’s hands clamp down on Steve’s hips, pull him close and tight. Purrs right into Steve’s ear, like it’s a secret, “Speaking of your natural talents.”

Then it’s Steve’s turn to shudder. The grind of Billy’s body is distracting, the possessive way Billy’s holding him, and then there’s his *smell*. That same fucking smell that thrills him and scares him and comforts him all at once. He buries his face in Billy’s neck, shucks off his own jacket and says, “It’s nothing. The condoms.”

“Supplies were my job this week,” Billy says, nipping at his ear. “But nice try.”

He can hear the grin in Billy’s words, the satisfaction of having caught him in a lie. He’s not sure why he bothered. As always, Billy sees right through him.

“Just,” he starts, tossing his jacket somewhere behind him. “Something I wrote.”

After months of shaking the nightmares loose from his head piece by piece and painstakingly transcribing them to paper, he finally did it. He finished his story. And when it was done, he read it all the way through, then read it again, and then again, until the sun was up and none of it seemed real anymore. That’s all the memories were, like that - just stories, like the ones in Dustin’s magazines. Stories can’t hurt you. His belonged to him now, to do with whatever he wanted. And for the first time in longer than he can remember, he was in control.

That morning, he slept. A blissfully easy sleep that carried him through the day. When he woke up, his mind free of everything but thoughts of Billy, he gathered the pages, folded them up, shoved them in the pocket of his bomber jacket, and hit the road.

*You ever get anything together, I’d read it*, Billy had said, once. Steve’s still not sure he meant it. Not sure why he’d even offer. Still, those words echoed through his mind every time he put a pencil to paper from then on.



“Something you wrote, huh?” Billy says, dipping his fingers under Steve’s waistband and tugging at his body, like he can tell how ready Steve’s been for this. Like he’s been craving it, too. Steve’s already hard and he knows Billy can feel it. “So you brought me a bedtime story. That’s so thoughtful.”

Now that his story and Billy are in the same room though, he’s not sure if that’s what he wants. It feels like a part of his soul is in these pages, and he’d just be handing it over, trusting Billy to keep it intact. And that’s fucking scary. Even without Billy knowing it was all true. The one thing he knows that he wants for sure, right now, is Billy. He knows he fucking loves the way this feels. Every time. He knows it’s been a whole week since he’s tasted Billy’s skin. He knows they’re wearing too many clothes.

“Didn’t you say something about wanting to take this off?” Steve says, pushing Billy’s jacket down his shoulders. He walks them further into the room - they’re tripping over each others’ feet, traipsing over Steve’s own discarded jacket, papers and all. With his mouth attached to Billy’s neck, he can’t find it in him to care.

Billy seems to care, though. He does an alarmed little shuffle, then looks down, nudging the small pile out of their way with his foot. It registers with Steve, but only for a second. He’s too busy tugging Billy’s jacket off his arms, finding a safe place to toss it - he chooses the nearby desk.

The shirt goes next. Billy just - lifts his arms when Steve tugs it up, lets him remove it.

Billy’s not usually this compliant. He loves to make Steve work for it. But now, he simply moves where Steve moves him - up against the bed, so that the edge of the mattress presses against the back of Billy’s thighs. He starts working at Billy’s fly as he leans in for a kiss. Lets it linger. Undoes the button and the zipper slowly, giving them time to gently lap at each others’ tongues. He doesn’t miss the look on Billy’s face when he pulls back a bit, curious and heated.

Once he gets Billy’s pants past his ass, (his bare ass, of course. At this point, if Billy ever showed up wearing briefs, he’d be worried), he pushes Billy down by the chest, so he’s sitting on the edge of the bed.

Then he drops right to his knees.

Focused as he is on what he wants, he barely hears Billy saying, *well fuck, alright*, as he tugs Billy's pants down his legs, over his feet. He can't take his eyes off Billy's cock. He hasn't seen many hard cocks in his life. In person, other than his own, only this one. But it's perfect. He looks at it and he just *knows*. Everything about Billy is fucking perfect, why should this be any exception?

His staring must be obvious, because Billy reaches down to curl his fingers around it, give it a couple slow strokes. Steve is fucking panting. He runs his hands up and down Billy's thighs, feels the delicate rasp of hair on skin, the tensing muscles underneath, and gets lost in the show, just for a moment. Then he takes Billy by the wrist and pulls his hand off.

"No, don't," he says, under his breath, though Billy's already stopped. "I just - wanna -"

He pushes Billy's knees wide apart, puts himself between Billy's legs. Billy's cock is inviting as hell, but his thighs... he wants those, too. He wants so many things tonight. He hefts one of Billy's legs over his shoulder so he can better access the warm smooth skin of his inner thigh, bends forward, and bites. He feels Billy lean back, hears him let out a single husky groan. It's just too good, that fleshy bit of him that always stays soft, that always yields to his lips and teeth. He can leave marks there if he wants, as many as he wants. It's his own space, and he loves leaving Billy with something he'll have to take back with him to Chicago. So he does just that. Billy digs his heel into Steve's back. Steve smiles to himself.

"Get on with it, then," Billy whines, but the muscles in his thigh are jumping and shivering, so Steve knows he likes it. He tastes so good there, right where he is, but Billy's cock would taste better. He lets Billy's leg slip off him as he leans forward and finally takes Billy into his mouth. They both let out a relieved sigh at the same time.

Even this, he's feeling good about. He didn't do this until the third time they met up, just let Billy do it to him. Billy never pushed, always let him set the pace, let him work up to each new experience when he was ready. Sucking cock was one of those things he had to

work up to.

Honestly, he doesn't know what he was waiting for.

Because this - how Billy buries a hand in Steve's hair; the tense, firm way he combs his fingers through, as if intentionally stopping himself from clenching them. The punched-out grunts and guttural moans that pour from him - has become one of his favorite things to do. He can't get over how much Billy loves it. How much Billy's response makes him feel *good* at it. This time, though, he takes Billy deeper than he ever has, savoring every second as he sucks, pulls back slowly, then dives in again. The confidence drives him. For the first time in a while, he's had a small taste of success. Now he's ready for dessert.

Billy's fingers do eventually tighten in his hair, though, and he starts to tug, saying urgently, "Come here, come here."

Steve backs off, looks up at Billy with watery eyes. Billy grabs him by the arm, his other hand grasping at Steve's shirt, and he urges Steve up off his knees and into his lap. He wraps one arm around Steve's waist and takes Steve by the back of the head to pull him into an intensely hungry kiss.

"Goddamn," Billy says when the kiss breaks, deep and throaty. "If you write half as well as you give head, you'll be gettin' a Pulitzer in no time."

Steve takes him by either side of his face, looks down on him, kisses him again. "If only there was an award for giving head," he says, smiling.

"Oh, you'd win for sure, baby," Billy growls back.

It's useless to try to stop kissing Billy, especially when his lips are right there, full and pink and parted. He babbles mindlessly against Billy's mouth, "Don't worry, I'll mention you in my acceptance speech. Couldn't have done it without you."

"True, I did teach you everything I know," Billy says, breathy and a little distant, like he's losing the thread of the conversation. He's

yanking at Steve's shirt with both hands, interrupting their kiss for one agonizing moment as he gets it up over Steve's head. Once it's off, Billy starts fumbling at his fly.

Steve's hips jerk against Billy's hands. He sucks on Billy's lower lip for a second - Billy actually did teach him that - then says, "Everything?"

Billy pauses. Pulls back just enough to study Steve's face. He's a little flushed. "Mm, maybe not *everything*." With that bit of distance, he makes quick work of Steve's button and zipper. Shoves one hand inside, taking Steve in a firm grip and giving him a few smooth, skilled strokes. "Gotta give you a reason to come back."

*I'll always come back*, he almost says, but doesn't. Nothing good ever came from making promises.

Instead he lets his moans speak for him. He hopes Billy gets the message in it, and in the reflexive rise and fall of his body as he thrusts into Billy's hand. Even though this thing between them only lives here, in this fleabag utopia, Steve wants it for as long as he can get it.

But he can't say that. He can barely speak at all. Still, he manages to choke out, "I can - think of one or two reasons," as he wraps a hand around Billy's dick.

He leans forward to press his forehead against Billy's and they just - move together. Billy's coaxing his body with his unoccupied hand on Steve's ass, and it's so easy. It's always so easy for them to fall into their own rhythm. Easier than he ever could've expected.

Steve's still trapped in his pants though. The last barrier between him and the addictive velvet of Billy's skin. He kisses Billy with enough force to shove him backwards, and they go toppling down, hands trapped awkwardly between their bodies. He lets go, rolls off Billy to wriggle out of his jeans and boxers, kicking them to the floor. The moment he's free, Billy is on him. Straddling his hips, a heavy, warm presence that has him pinned blissfully to the mattress.

He claims Steve's lips but then he's on his way, pressing kisses down

his throat, along his collarbones, across his chest. Grazes his teeth over a nipple, soothing it with his tongue when Steve jumps. His hands are on a similarly exploratory path, sliding up Steve's sides, dragging over his chest and shoulders, anchoring himself on both of Steve's biceps.

Now it's Steve's turn to sink his fingers into Billy's hair, letting out a long sigh of satisfaction. He scratches his way down Billy's scalp, his neck, while Billy helps himself to Steve's body, mouth soft and seeking, and he just arches his back and lets Billy take, take, take. Gives Billy whatever's in him that's left. Like he always does.

Billy scoots down Steve's legs to press kisses into Steve's stomach. Takes extra time with it, nuzzling into the dip of Steve's belly when he reflexively sucks it in. Steve can hear his own heavy breathing, feel his cock leaking.

"Ugh, Billy," he whines, because it's too much just for him, it's too good. Almost so good it scares him. He's getting overwarm from all the attention and he needs to be touching Billy, too. The hand in Billy's hair, scrabbling to grab at Billy's shoulder, just doesn't cut it.

But Billy's not even remotely deterred, absorbed in nibbling the jut of Steve's hipbone. "You're so fuckin' hot," he says, like it's some sort of newly discovered revelation. "It just doesn't get old."

Steve tries to say Billy's name again, because it's all he can say - he can't get his head straight - but it comes out choked as Billy suddenly licks a long stripe up his cock.

"Fuck," he groans. He lifts his head so he can look. He has to, needs to watch what Billy's doing, so he can file it away for later. Billy's already looking up at him. Their eyes lock immediately and Steve can't fucking breathe.

He's not sure if it's the eye contact or the look on his face but suddenly Billy is climbing back up, pressing his body heavily to Steve's side and capturing his mouth in a deep, deep kiss. His tongue slides between Steve's lips at the same time that a hand wraps around Steve's cock and Steve moans right into his mouth.

Finally that moment strikes, like it always does eventually, when the rest of the world fades away and all he can hear and smell and feel, all that registers is Billy. The need for him is so intense, like making up for lost time - not even just the time that has passed but the time that's yet to pass, the future, when all they'll have is the memory of this. He cups Billy's cheek, gently persuading Billy's mouth off his so that he can speak, because -

"I wanna fuck you, I really wanna fuck you. Right now."

Billy nods, then hauls himself off Steve, rushing to the desk to dig around in the inner pocket of his jacket. He flings a row of condoms onto the bed, is already popping the cap on the lube before he makes it back, squeezing it onto his fingers.

Steve likes to prep him, has liked it since the first time he did it. It's a thrill, the way he can play Billy with his fingers. It's the only time he can get Billy squirming like that - or at all. But Billy seems to feel the same sense of urgency Steve does, and as soon as his knees are planted on either side of Steve's waist, he braces one hand on Steve's chest to keep his balance, then reaches behind himself with the other. Steve knows exactly what he's doing and it's a delight, it's better than any porn, better than any fantasy, this display Billy's putting on. All he can do is run his hands up and down Billy's body, hardly daring to blink.

While Billy is busy, Steve gives his own cock a couple involuntary tugs, then reaches for a condom, tearing open the package and rolling it on. Then Billy's hovering over Steve and lining himself up. Steve thinks idly that he would've taken longer to open Billy up than Billy's given himself, but he's not gonna question it. Billy's always been decisive, a man of action. It's something Steve admires about him. When he's ready, he's ready.

Steve takes himself by the base of his dick, holding it steady while Billy sinks down with a hiss. The moment he's inside Billy, he has to gasp, has to lock the air in his lungs to stop from shouting. He grabs Billy's hips and squeezes reassuringly, closes his eyes as Billy sinks down incrementally.

"Ah, god, you're so tight," he says, a little strangled.

Once he's fully seated, Billy lets out a long breath, prompting Steve to look up at him.

"I waited a whole week for this, Harrington." The name comes out a little too pointed, like it's a shield he's hiding behind. He rarely uses that name for Steve anymore. "What do you expect?"

Then he leans forward and starts to move, small rocking motions that punch the air from Steve's lungs. Billy's eyes are a little glazed, his jaw slack. It's the most unguarded Steve ever sees him and it's absolutely fucking gorgeous.

The sway of his body grows more wild, more insistent with each passing minute. He's panting, Steve's gnawing at his lip. If he moans too loudly, the neighbors are sure to hear, so he never does. The way Billy's riding him, though, he thinks he deserves a medal just for keeping it all inside.

Well... not all of it. When Billy squeezes around him, he can't help the noise he makes. It seems to draw Billy down to him, forearms resting on either side of Steve's head. When he goes in for a kiss, Steve is so relieved he could cry. He wraps his arms around Billy, holding him close.

"What I wouldn't do for you to fuck me like this every day, though," Billy says brokenly. He travels from Steve's lips down to his throat, his voice so quiet and distant, Steve's not even sure he knows he's saying anything out loud. "You should come back with me sometime. I'd make it - worth your while."

Warmth bursts through Steve from his core traveling outwards, his face getting hot as his heart kicks right up. He can't do that. He knows he can't - they both do. Billy has his life, Steve has his. They meet halfway. That's just how it is. They've always been oil and water, and just because Steve gets his cock in Billy sometimes doesn't mean that's changed. Stir them together and they'll find a way to mix, but given time to settle, they'll always separate. It's why he savors every moment of this, every time they do it.

He shouldn't entertain it. Should just kiss Billy to shut him up, stop him from saying the sort of things that make Steve's head swim with

false hope. But...

Right now, right here like this, as Steve fucks up into him, the thought of it is too goddamn good. Every day - the grasp of Billy's hands, the rapture of his body, the shocking brightness of his smile, even when it's sarcastic, even when it's feral - he can't imagine what kind of life that would be. He just knows it's not the kind of life he can have, or the kind of life he *should* have, but Billy - Billy makes him think that he can. And even knowing it'll only crush him later, he lets himself feel it.

"Yeah," Steve says, so close to Billy's ear that all he has to do is breathe the words out. Billy sucks on his pulse while Steve drags slack, open-mouthed kisses over Billy's cheek. "Yeah, maybe I will."

At that, Billy only fucks himself harder, more desperately. Steve plants his heels into the mattress, snaps his hips up over and over. Billy's fully buried in Steve's neck and he knows they're both barreling toward the edge. He gets a hand between them, starts jerking Billy tight and quick as he can manage, his knuckles scraping along Billy's stomach.

Just then, there's a flash in the corner of his vision.

He thinks he imagined it, until he hears the rumble of thunder. Not a minute later, there's the patter of rain on the window. It reminds him of that day - Steve thinks of it as the day they truly met. After all, duking it out with a guy and scowling at him on the court isn't the same as knowing him. Now, he knows exactly when Billy's gonna come from the pattern of his breaths and the shade of red on his neck, and that - that's gotta count for something.

It's that very pattern that tells Steve that Billy's seconds away, and the simple knowledge of that pushes him over, cock pulsing in Billy so hard it forces a high-pitched keen from his throat, makes his muscles clench, makes him dig his nails into Billy's back.

"Oh fuck, Steve, fuck, I'm gonna - I'm gonna come," Billy says feverishly, but of course, Steve knows.

It doesn't surprise him to feel the hot stream of Billy spilling onto his



chest, but it does please him, in a way he can't put into words. It's still not altogether familiar, but gets moreso every time he feels it.

Billy collapses on top of him, then slides to one side, head next to Steve's, arm draped over Steve's stomach. It's some time before they're able to catch their breath. All the while, heavy droplets of rain beat against the glass, thunder echoes overhead.

Lazily, Steve pulls the sticky condom off, tosses it somewhere on the floor.

They clean themselves up when they finally regain enough strength to get off the bed, though Steve is still loose-limbed and wobbly as he moves around the room. They don't say much, just keep shooting glances at each other, trading small, knowing smiles while they go about their business.

Before too long they're back in bed, half-propped on pillows, legs tangled together. Just - talking. Small talk, mostly, about their respective drives over here, about the weather, about the leaky sink in the bathroom. Steve lets himself relax. Lets his mind drift.

"So," Billy says after a brief lull in conversation. "You gonna submit that thing you wrote to one of those nerdy magazines you like so much?"

Steve looks over at him. Doesn't find anything mocking in Billy's expression.

"I dunno, maybe." Steve shrugs. "I didn't really think that far. I just... had to get it out of my head. But..." he smiles to himself at the thought, "...it would be pretty cool."

He can't miss the way Billy's looking at him, the way his own small smile is reflected back to him in the glimmer of Billy's eyes.

"I gotta say, I don't hate this side of you. A little less King Steve, a little more Stephen King."

Steve laughs. The idea's ridiculous, really, but then again, what he and Billy do here every week is ridiculous. Life, he's found so far, is completely unexpected. Why should the future be any different?

In the spirit of change, Steve lays a hand on Billy's bare thigh, swallows his doubt, and says, "You wanna get breakfast tomorrow?"

~\*~

When the waitress comes around with the coffee pot, Billy immediately puts his hand over his cup. "None for me, thanks." It's not that he doesn't want coffee. He would gladly chug several mugs of it. But he's tasted the coffee from this place on Steve's mouth enough times now to recognize it as the worst available in the state.

The waitress fills Steve's cup and says, "Passing through again?"

Billy registers Steve's discomfort. "Passing through," he echoes with a weak smile.

Billy distracts from Steve by saying, "What's the special, sweetheart?" He gives her his mom-panty-peeler smile.

It works. She forgets Steve in about two seconds, her hand fluttering to her hair. "Two eggs, two sausages or bacon, two flapjacks and hash browns."

He gives her his best 'we are absolutely going to fuck later' eyes and holds the menu up to her. "Sausage." When she takes it, he winks, and her cheeks flush.

Looking at him with something between consternation and admiration, Steve says, "Same but with bacon."

"Two specials, coming right up," the waitress says, then scurries away.

Steve shakes his head. Billy leans back in the booth, stretching out his legs. "What?" he says innocently.

"Do you even like women?"

“No, Steve, I hate half the human race for no reason.”

“No—that’s not what I mean.” Steve’s making a face, like he can’t believe he’s never asked this question before. “Do you...”

Billy shakes his head, not shy about it. “Nope.”

“Then how the fuck can you do that?”

“I was born like this.”

“Yeah,” Steve mutters, “Christ help us.”

Except he’s softer around the edges this morning. Even now when he’s pretending to be irritated, he’s got this smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. Steve picks up his cup and puts his lips to the rim. Billy follows them with his eyes, remembering *exactly* where that mouth was last night. Steve sees him looking and holds his eyes.

Tapping his fingers on the table, wanting a cigarette but not seeing an ashtray, Billy says, “You want my tips for flirting with middle aged women? Give zero fucks. I know I’m not going home with them, so what have I got to lose? Besides, when was the last time someone who looked like this gave them the time of day?” He gestures to himself.

“Modesty has always been one of your best qualities.”

“Taking cock deep enough to pierce my inside is one of my best qualities.”

Steve glances around, frantic for a second, then hisses, “Would you keep your goddamn voice down?” Still not really mad, though. Almost laughing.

“Oh, Jesus, Steve, we burn this place, we’ll just find another shitty one along the road.”

“There’s not another one exactly at the halfway point between Hawkins and Chicago.”

“There’s that one looks like it has bedbugs about ten miles away.

You'll love it." Billy bunches himself up, itching for a smoke. He should have had one on the walk over from the hotel. He leans forward against the table and looks Steve right in the eyes. "So do I get to read your story?"

Steve falters. "No."

"Yes. You meant to say yes."

"No. I finished it, but..."

"You said I could read it."

"I didn't promise you anything."

"Yeah, that's kind of the basis of what we've got going here. But I want...to read...your story." Steve makes a face, looking out the window. Billy just keeps gazing at him, barely blinking. "Come on. You owe me."

"Owe you *what*?"

"I'm already walking funny and now I've got to sit in the car on that bumpy road all the way back to Chicago. You practically owe me a ring for that one, Steve. All I'm asking is to read your story." He bats his eyelashes. "Come on. Pretty please. You wouldn't have brought it if you didn't want me to read it."

He sees Steve coming around. Like he obviously would. Billy can play him pretty easily when he wants to. On some things.

Others...well, it might take a year before he can coax Steve up to Chicago, regardless of what he said last night.

Steve lets out a put-upon sigh. "It's not that good."

Billy holds out an expectant hand.

Steve would probably act less aggrieved if Billy was pulling his fingernails. He takes the folded papers from his jean jacket, holding them out between two fingers. Billy snatches them with a grin.

He immediately unfolds them, laying them on the table. “What, you’re gonna read it right now?” Steve says, alarmed.

Billy takes out his cigarettes, turning over his coffee cup to use as an ashtray. “No, I’m going to read it while my ass is taking a second pounding on the highway.” He lights up and leans over the pages, ignoring Steve, and starts to read.

Three cigarettes and a decent breakfast later, Billy comes to the last words on the page. He sits back, taking a long drag.

He hasn’t said anything to Steve in the last hour. The other man is sitting completely still, vibrating from four cups of coffee. He’s watching Billy, brow so knotted it would take a sword to get it apart.

Billy says, “Huh.”

“What,” Steve says, almost snapping it. “What does that mean?”

“I pegged you for a lot of things, Harrington. Talented wasn’t one of them.”

Steve stares at him, then says, “Yeah?”

Billy raises his brows, rifling through the pages. “Yeah.” He doesn’t know whether to be dazed, impressed, or concerned. Of all the things he expected from Steve...Jesus. “This...is terrifying.”

“Really.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean—good terrifying or bad terrifying?”

“Terrifying like I’m scared my neighbour’s dog is going to eat me in the night. I mean—this is some fucked up shit. You do that—finding the horror in the ordinary thing that’s popular these days. Except weirder. It’s...it’s pretty fucking good, Steve.”

“Good though. Not weird enough that you want to lose my number.”

“Why would I lose your number? You’re going to be a rich writer

someday. I'm hitching onto your star now." Billy taps some more ashes into the coffee cup and asks, "Where the hell did you come up with this?"

Steve prevaricates before shrugging. "I have some weird nightmares sometimes. I guess I kind of go from there."

"I guess this is cheaper than a shrink."

"You really think I'm messed up?"

Billy lets out a laugh. "No. Take it from someone who spent his first eighteen years being messed up. I don't think you're some mommy diddling psycho. I think you could probably write one, though."

"I don't know if that's a compliment or not."

"It is."

"Then...thank you." Steve holds his hand out for the story.

Billy folds it up. He nearly puts it into Steve's hand before pulling it back. "I want a copy."

"Um—sure. I can type something up when I get home—"

"No. When you publish it. I want you to get me a copy." He pushes the papers into Steve's hand and sits back.

Pausing, Steve says, "You think I could...do that?"

"If you don't start sending that around to the nerd magazines your little friend lets you borrow, I'm going to punch you in your teeth. Seriously, don't sit on that. Do something with it."

With a crooked smile, Steve puts the papers back into his jacket. "Billy Hargrove. Literary critic."

"I don't know how many fucking times I have to tell you. I read." Billy kicks Steve lightly beneath the table. "I mean it—send that thing out."

"Listen, I appreciate the vote of confidence, but—c'mon, man. What are the odds that I actually do anything with my life?"

Billy frowns. He crushes the cigarette against the inside of the cup, dropping it. "I'm going to throw an idea at you. Stop me if you've heard this one before." He spreads his hands. "You don't have to die in Hawkins."

Steve doesn't come back at him with an eye roll or a clever remark. Instead, he just smiles slightly. That look in his eyes that was all over him back at the grad dinner. "You know, I told myself that a lot. All through high school. After I graduated. The first couple of years I was out. But...it is what it is."

"Jackass, you're twenty-one. Stop talking like you've got a wife and three kids holding you back."

"Some people just don't make it out. That's how it works."

"That's bullshit. People don't make it out because they give up."

"What makes you think I haven't?"

Billy thumbs out the window, towards the motel. "This seems pretty drastic for a guy who's given up on life."

"This doesn't have anything to do with that. This is just...chemical."

"Chemical, huh."

"You tell me how you explain it."

"I think you're hot," Billy says, voice low. "I want you. I get what I want. That's not chemicals, that's something else."

"What is it?"

"Mutual attraction, you fucking moron."

Steve finally smiles at that, ducking his head. One of his hands rests loosely on the table. Billy wants to reach over and touch it, but he's pretty sure that if he did, Steve might lose that goofy look on his face.

“Don’t know if I can argue with that.”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck off, Billy, you know I wouldn’t be here if...” Steve bites into his lip, but his smile is affectionate.

*Do it. He’s in a good mood. Just go for it .*

“I want to take you out in public,” Billy says.

Steve doesn’t seem to have any idea what that means. “What?”

Billy’s heart skips a beat. If he fucks this up, he could be destroying months of...whatever this has been. Well, he knows what it’s been to him, but Christ only knows what Steve thinks of it. Scratching his fingertips over the table top, Billy looks at Steve and keeps his voice calm.

“You said you’d come to Chicago.”

Steve gives it a second, then replies, “Yeah. I did.”

“You should come this weekend.”

“What’s happening this weekend?”

“I’m going out with my roommate. And his guy.”

There’s a flicker to Steve’s eyes. “I didn’t know you had a roommate,” he says, even though Billy knows that’s not the bit that caught his attention.

“You don’t ask a lot of questions when my cock’s in your mouth. Come up to the city, come out with us.”

“Where?” Steve says, a little laugh to his voice, like the whole thing’s a joke. Making it a joke instead of being afraid of it.

“Just out to a bar.”

Steve shifts in his seat. “What kind of bar?”



“What, you’re worried I’m gonna take you somewhere that you’re gonna get AIDS if you touch the walls? It’s a gay bar, dipshit.”

Now that Billy’s been explicit about it, Steve says, “Oh—no, man, I don’t—”

“I’m not coming back down here unless you say yes.”

“You what?”

“You heard me.”

“What, you’re giving ultimatums now?”

Billy grins. “Only because I know you’re too chickenshit to do it unless I force you into it. You’re not giving up on this ass, and I’m not coming back down here unless you come up to Chicago this weekend. So...I guess you’re coming to Chicago this weekend.”

Steve looks at him sideways, and Billy can tell that he’s not going to say no. “Maybe I don’t want to go to some queer bar.”

“You’ll want to go to this one.”

“I don’t want to go to any of them—”

“I told you how I made some extra money when I first moved to Chicago, right?”

Intrigued, Steve says, “No.”

“I danced at the bar I’m talking about. In a cage. In my underwear.” Billy leans over his empty plate, voice low and dirty. “How’d you like to see me do that in front of a crowd? I know you like to have me all to yourself, but—think about it. A whole room of people looking at me in a scrap of fabric that barely covers my nuts. I was legendary there. I got guys harder than patriotism gets Reagan. If you come to Chicago, if you go out with me, we’ll go there. And I’ll give you a show.” He can see Steve hesitating, and goes in for the kill. “You know what’s better than having a dirty little secret, Steve? Having a dirty little secret you can wave around in a room full of people, knowing they all fucking wish they’re you.” Billy runs his tongue

over his teeth. “Come on. It would make me happy. And when I’m happy, you know I’ll fucking make you happy.”

He waits, not wanting to push anymore. If he does, Steve will definitely laugh it off. Right now, though, he’s on the fence. And he’s definitely wobbling.

Steve thinks a bit, but obviously not too much, because he says, “Sure. What the hell.”

“Good.”

“Great,” Steve shrugs, as if this isn’t a step in the right direction.

If Billy gets him to Chicago, he’s half convinced he’ll never let Steve leave.

## 4. Chapter 4

Steve tries not to make eye contact with anyone on the train as it barrels down the tracks.

It's easy to accomplish - there's plenty to see out the window. City lights are not something he's used to. The world is lit up in that artificial way, even though the sun has long since set. There's so much activity everywhere he looks, on every street, people streaming down the sidewalks and spilling out of doors. Do any cities ever really sleep?

The heavy, metal "L" train - The Red Line, Billy had said - creaks and squeals and clangs its way forward, speeding too quickly for Steve to be able to commit any of what he's seeing to memory. When it pulls into the next stop, a few people step off but even more people step on, and Steve huddles himself deeper against the wall, trying to make himself invisible.

At his side, Billy seems completely relaxed, legs slightly spread in his seat, so that his knee is resting against Steve's. It brings little comfort. Not like it normally would.

He feels like every other passenger on the train car knows exactly where he's headed.

For at least the tenth time that evening, he wonders how he let Billy talk him into this. He remembers Billy being... persuasive, but not much else, now that he's on his way, wearing clothes that feel all wrong and running on less sleep than he'd like. It'd been a long drive. Almost seven goddamn hours, but he'd left early and made good time. Billy let him crash for an hour or so, then they'd put themselves together, and left.

He'd been so anxious, he didn't even take the time to appreciate Billy's - in retrospect, pretty elaborate - routine, which involved a lot of sniffing at himself in the mirror and putting cologne in places Steve didn't realize cologne could go. He thinks about it now, quirks a private smile to the world outside the window.

Across the aisle, Billy's roommate, Joel ("We moved in together for the Piano Man jokes," Billy had said upon introducing them, a little rehearsed, like he drops that line all the time) and his boyfriend Rodney seem much more subdued than they did before they got on the train. Back at Billy's place they were all giddy laughter and flirtation, coy smiles and stolen kisses. Now they're still and quiet, keeping their hands to themselves, speaking to each other in low voices.

So, Steve thinks, maybe he's not entirely wrong to worry about being discreet.

The train rolls on as Steve's apprehension grows, but just before he can seriously entertain the idea of backing out, Billy's rising from his seat. He looks down at Steve, gesturing towards the double doors with his chin as the train slows to a stop. Steve follows the flow of people down the platform and onto the street.

It's a warm fall night. Billy lights up a cigarette as they start walking, offers one to Steve. It's something to do with his hands, something to concentrate on other than the stupid blue striped polo he'd spent forever picking out, and how it looks next to the simple white t-shirt Billy wears so effortlessly it makes Steve want to scream. Ahead of them, Billy's friends are starting to get some of their swagger back. Rodney's swaying his hips, waving his hands around as he speaks in increasingly high-pitched, excitable tones. Joel just grins at him, reaching out to rub Rodney's back encouragingly. Considering where they're headed, the way they're dressed in a blend of leather and mesh and skin, there's no mistaking they're gay.

Steve wonders how he looks to the people around them. If everyone can tell what he and Billy do on the weekends.

When his cigarette has burned down to the filter, he flicks it into the curb and shoves his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He keeps his eyes fixed to the ground in front of his feet, the heat of Billy, the scuffling of Billy's boots, ever-present next to him. Next he looks up though, he realizes - the atmosphere around them has changed.

It's like stepping into a subtly warped, vibrant version of his own world. There are women holding hands, men in various states of

undress. Scattered rainbow flags adorn windows, street lamps, mailboxes and trash cans, faded and tattered but still hanging on despite the elements. There is joy echoing through the night, a certain irreverence in the air. Something like rebellion. He can taste it on his tongue. His heart kicks up.

For all his nonchalance up to this point, there's a gleam in Billy's eye, a liveliness in the way he licks his lips and shakes his hair out that shows exactly how excited he is about this. How ready he is for it. He looks over at Steve, dangling earring glinting under the street lights. Studies him for a moment, then flashes him a small smile.

It doesn't take much effort to return it. Nervous as Steve is, Billy's smile is irresistible.

"Alright, here we are," Billy says, a little pointlessly as their ragtag group walks up on a big building with a huge glowing sign reading "Amsterdam" and gets in line.

"Oh my god, I'm so amped about this," Rodney says, hopping in place and shaking out his limbs, like he's warming up for a race. "I had such a shitty week. They're gonna have to drag me out when the sun comes up."

Joel snorts. "Well, I gotta work tomorrow, so you have fun with that."

"That's fine," Rodney says, running a teasing hand down Joel's chest. "These guys'll stay with me, right?" he asks, turning an eye on Steve - an eye adorned with purple eyeshadow and probably mascara and whatever else chicks wear, Steve notes. "You look like you can handle yourself. Stick it out for the long haul."

Steve shrugs as casually as he can manage, not sure how to respond to Rodney's coquettish grin. "We'll see."

The line's moving quick.

"Oh please, you're gonna knock 'em dead in there," Rodney adds, doing a full visual sweep of Steve's body down to his toes and back up.

Steve looks at Joel, who for his part only elbows his boyfriend and shakes his head, saying, "Don't scare him, Rod, he's a virgin."

"I know! That's why we gotta make sure his first time is memorable!"

"Why don't you leave that to me, huh?" Billy cuts in, shifting a little closer.

Before long they're at the front of the line, showing their IDs to the bouncer, getting their hands stamped with little black birds. Billy's friends go in first, he and Billy close behind. Just before they pass through the door, Billy throws an arm up around Steve's shoulders, gives his arm a gentle squeeze. Steve feels a little bad about the way he tenses up.

"You're about to have the night of your life, pretty boy," Billy says into his ear. Then, louder, with a little bump of his hip against Steve's he adds, "You need this."

The moment they enter, Steve is assaulted with light and sound. He's been to bars, sure, but nothing like this - music so loud he can barely hear himself think, the scent of booze and sweat thick in the air. Everywhere he looks are writhing bodies, clusters of people throwing their arms in the air or standing in tight circles, smoking and drinking and touching. So much touching. He knows his eyes are wide as saucers and that his lips are parted but he can't concentrate enough to even control his face. He tucks himself a little deeper against Billy.

"Let's get a drink in you, first off," Billy says, guiding him by the shoulders over to the chest-high countertop.

Jack and Coke in hand, Steve gathers with the others against a deserted spot by the wall near the bar. Rodney's already dancing in place, like he's got no time to waste, Billy and Joel are leaning in to yell in each others' ears over the music, but Steve - all he can do is take it all in.

He's not sure he's ever seen such an eclectic crowd. Not at any of the bars or concerts he's ever been to, not in or near shitty, boring-ass Hawkins. There are people of every race, every size, every age, the

kind of melting pot he's been taught about in school since he was a kid but never really seen. There are men done up as women, dressed outlandishly, tall and confident and - sexy as hell, really. Absolutely everyone seems to fit in.

Except for him.

He blazes with awareness of how little he belongs. He feels like he's going to be asked to leave at any moment, honestly. Wonders why he had to wear this stupid fuckin' polo. He should've asked Billy to borrow something. The burn in his face floods down his neck at the thought, a somewhat pleasant distraction.

It gets easier, though. For a while, Steve's relieved to note, this is much like his other bar experiences in that all they do is stand around talking and drinking. At the bottom of the second round, Steve can feel himself start to loosen up, can feel the edges start to dull on all the foreign things around him. While Billy's turned away, trying to wave down the bartender, Joel sidles up close to speak near his ear.

"So, what do you think?"

"It's pretty cool," Steve shouts back, noncommittal. He's not actually sure what he thinks. It's - a lot, but he's not sure that's an answer.

"Billy talks about you all the time. I mean, just to me and Rod," Joel hurries to add. "We never thought we were ever gonna meet you! You're such a mystery." Joel wiggles his eyebrows dramatically, and Steve feels a distinct fluttering in his chest, pulls his lips in between his teeth. The next couple breaths he takes are conscious ones. If what he's feeling shows on his face, Joel doesn't mention it. "We were starting to think he kept driving out to bumfuck nowhere to secretly meet a woman or something," he laughs, and Steve laughs with him.

"Nope, just some asshole he used to know in high school."

Joel grins, and nods as if in deep, sage understanding. "Ah, well, we've all got one, right? Mine was Todd Haversham." He draws the name out dreamily, knocks back the last of what's in his glass. "Total

dick. But if he was here tonight? Fuck. You better believe my tongue would be halfway down his throat by now. Or well -" He pauses. Tips his head, considering. "Maybe not his throat."

Steve's tries to cobble together a response, but all he manages is a strangled, "I -" before Rodney is next to them, looping his arm around Joel's and tugging.

"I want to dance, come on, dance with me," he whines, expression pleading.

Steve just watches as Joel wraps an arm around his waist, leans in for a kiss. He waves a little salute at Steve as they float away, dissolving into the rolling crowd. Moments later, a fresh drink is being shoved into Steve's hand.

"Thanks," he calls, turning to face Billy straight on. Even in the dim lighting Steve can see the way the whiskey has warmed his cheeks.

"You havin' fun?" Billy asks, at the same time as he reaches up with a free hand to brush the hair off Steve's forehead. Part of Steve wants to press into Billy's palm, wants to feel Billy's fingers sink all the way down to his scalp. The other part wants to duck out of reach, avoid being seen. But of course, he reminds himself, that's silly. It doesn't matter if they're seen here. No one would care. Here, it's normal for Billy to touch him like that.

In the motel, he doesn't have to question things. The Value Inn is its own realm, one of their making, with no expectations and no rules. Out in the real world, it's different. In the privacy of their room, he can just suck Billy's cock and not even think twice. In the real world, a *cocksucker* has - implications.

"You're thinking too much," Billy says, close. Then, after a moment of contemplation, "Look -"

He wheels Steve around by his shoulder to face the crowd, moves behind him so he can speak directly into Steve's ear. A broad hand settles on his opposite hip. It - helps. Billy literally has his back.

"Every one of these people is someone else during the daytime," he



says. Steve can smell the whiskey on his breath. Can feel Billy's heat seeping into his skin through their clothes. "They come here to get away from all the judgemental bullshit. You see that guy?" He gestures with his tumbler, a bit of his drink splashing up and spilling over the side. Steve follows the movement to a man on the outskirts of the dance floor, wearing a bright green tank top and skin-tight leather pants. There are streaks of paint on his cheekbones that glow under the lights. "He's probably in, like, real estate. Probably boring as hell outside here. And that guy -" A different man now, wearing short shorts, a wide-open button down and a bowtie strapped neatly around his neck. "That one's an ad executive, rich as fuck, probably goes club hopping in a different city every weekend."

"And what about him?" Steve asks, playing along. He nods to yet another man, this one rather modest-looking, t-shirt tucked into his bootcut jeans.

"That guy? Oh, total closet case."

Steve's stomach clenches. He grips his glass tighter.

"I'm just fuckin' with you," Billy says, giving Steve's hip a little squeeze. "My point is, you can be whoever you want here. No strings attached."

The thought that immediately comes to mind clangs around his head like a bell, deafening, louder even than the music -

*I don't know who I am.*

He turns, needing to look at Billy. Needing to ground himself in those piercing blue eyes that he's grown to know so well. Billy's hand slides over his back as he rotates, coming to rest on the dip of Steve's waist. It's the only thing stopping Steve from melting into the floor.

Trying to keep his tone light, he says, "So, what, you're telling me is I don't know the real you?"

Billy looks off, somewhere over Steve's shoulder, and shrugs. "Not all of me, no. Though that reminds me," he says, a devilish grin spreading over his face as he meets Steve's eye again. "I believe I

made you a promise.”

Realization washes over him like a bucket of ice water. No fucking way. He honestly thought Billy was kidding.

“Stay right here,” Billy says, throwing back the rest of his drink, reaching to slam the glass down on the nearby bar top. “And keep your eyes peeled. Get another drink if you want.” He reaches around to give Steve a playful smack on the ass, then saunters away, leaving Steve alone and stunned, his head swimming.

He leans back against the wall and watches the crowd, swirling around the contents of his glass. Most of the ice has melted. He takes a sip and tries to make it look like he doesn’t mind being alone.

A few minutes of solid, uninterrupted observation pass, Billy’s words a broken record in his mind. Billy’s right - everyone around him is being true to themselves, but he doesn’t know how to do that. Even back home, at work, around the kids, in the most mundane of places, he feels like a fraud. How in the hell is he supposed to be his authentic self *here*? How’s he supposed to know who his authentic self even is?

“First time?”

The question jolts him out of his thoughts. He turns his head to look at the guy that’s suddenly there, shoulder against the wall, leaning in towards him.

“Uh, yeah,” he says automatically. He takes a second to look him over - a crown of black ringlets cascade down almost to the guy’s shoulders, an impressive mustache decorating his upper lip, the kind Steve has never been able to grow. He can see a wide strip of skin between the guy’s short shirt and his waistband if he looks down, so he doesn’t look down. Can’t say the same for the other guy. “I’m not from around here.”

“I knew it. First timers are always wallflowers, and you just have that look to you,” the guy says. “Kinda that deer-in-headlights look - but it’s cute,” he clarifies. His smile, Steve can’t help but notice, is rather warm and disarming.

"I was hoping it wasn't that obvious," Steve says. His heart's in his throat, but he tries to swallow it down. Tells himself this is no different than meeting someone at any other bar, or a friend's parents, or new clientele at the country club. But he knows it is.

"I'm Julian," the guy says with a laugh, holding out his hand.

Steve takes it, gives it a firm shake. "Steve," he shouts, above the music.

"So if you're not from around here, where you from?"

No sooner does Steve tell him he's from Indiana than Julian cuts right to the chase. "I like your style," he says. Lifts a hand to quickly brush his fingers down Steve's sleeve, as if he's admiring the fabric. "I love preppy guys."

*Sorry, I'm not gay*, he almost says. Stops himself before he can. The words rise up instinctively, a reflex. But - he's here, isn't he? And Billy -

But that's different. That's *Billy*. They have a history. It's complicated. Even if he was kind of gay, he's not gay in the way *Rodney's* gay. But he doesn't know how to explain that. Doesn't even know if he could. Yet again, it strikes him how out of place he is here.

"Thanks," he says, instead of spilling his internal crisis all over this complete stranger. "I like your mustache," he says, then flinches. Why the fuck did he say that? He mentally curses at himself - but then again, politeness has always been in his nature.

Julian's smile grows at the compliment.

"So, Steve from Indiana, you feel like getting off the wall for a little bit? Popping your cherry on the dance floor?"

Tongue-tied, panic zipping through his veins, he takes a sip from his glass to buy himself some time. Then he puts on his best apologetic face and says, "I can't."

Julian's head tilts, his shoulders slump, disappointment written all over him. Like he hadn't been expecting that answer at all. Brow

furrowed, he asks, “You here with someone? A boyfriend?”

“No, he’s not my -” he cuts himself off, feeling strangely guilty in a way he can’t place. “Yeah, I’m - I’m waiting for somebody.”

Speaking of which. Steve looks away, scanning the crowd. Everything looks normal - well, normal by this place’s standards, anyway. He idly wonders how long he’s supposed to wait when the music transitions around him, the synth shifting into something a little deeper, a little less frantic, but still entirely upbeat. He hasn’t been able to tell one song from another all night, but something tells him to keep watching. To not look away.

When he sees it, his jaw drops.

Billy. Stepping up into an honest-to-god cage. Almost completely fucking naked. Just a pair of red boxer briefs between him and countless prying eyes.

From his side, there’s a “That’s too bad. Save a dance for me later?” that he barely hears.

“I gotta go,” he says, eyes trained toward the front of the room as he blindly sets his glass down on the nearby counter. “Nice to meet you,” he adds, that same politeness rearing its head, and then he’s moving.

Like a salmon being carried upstream, he swims between the sea of bodies, slipping through the empty spaces. The beat is pulsing, hitting him in waves. His pounding heart adjusts to match. He can’t believe Billy’s really in a fucking cage, wearing nothing but his underwear and an arrogant grin. Steve can barely process it. Just needs to get closer.

Billy’s already attracted plenty of attention by the time Steve reaches the base of the platform - and why wouldn’t he?

He’s absolutely glistening with sweat, his briefs leaving nothing to the imagination. The music throbs in the air, moving through Billy, guiding every sinuous roll of his hips. He dances the way he does everything else, with grace and strength and confidence. The way,

Steve imagines, he probably fucks. Like that's exactly how he'd fuck Steve, if Steve ever gave him the chance.

And clearly, he's not the only one thinking it. It's the whole point, Steve supposes, to make them look. To make them *want*, and it's definitely working. There are so many pairs of eyes on Billy as he hangs onto one of the bars, grinding and thrusting to the beat. Experience is written in every movement. Steve wonders when the last time was that Billy did this.

Despite all the men watching, their yearning so thick Steve could choke on it, Billy's only got eyes for him. Like it's a private show, designed specifically to drive Steve insane. He sways and dips, runs a hand across his own chest, over his stomach, and all the while he's looking down at Steve, steadily holding his gaze.

It's fucking mesmerizing.

Billy's tongue is hanging out, smiling and panting and proud as hell. He looks like a lion - dangerous, predatory, completely unafraid. As though everyone and everything he sees belongs to him. It reminds Steve of high school, except there's nothing like hostility in his eyes, the way there was then. Just - joy. An incredible, virulent joy that Steve can't help but be infected by.

When Billy eventually tears his eyes away, it's so that he can turn around and stick his ass out for the adoring masses, muscles flexing beneath thin cotton and it reminds Steve - he's had that ass. So many times now. For months, it's been all his, and when this night is over, he'll get it again, and everything that comes with it. Billy's body is incredible, solid and lean, as good as it ever was. Better, even.

Steve realizes he's aching hard and desperate to touch everything he sees. He wants Billy to leave the platform so he can get his hands all over him, but at the same time, he never wants this to end.

Billy pivots around, tucks his thumbs into his waistband, giving it a teasing little tug. Pulls away with a wink before he shows anything else. Steve lets out a breath.

As the song finally starts nearing its end, Billy stands right in front of

Steve, grabbing the bars with both hands and snaking his body down the side of the cage. He drops to his knees with a wicked smile and - like something out of a fucking movie, or really a cartoon - he reaches down through the bars, rests a single finger underneath Steve's chin, and closes his open mouth.

Laughter erupts all around him, muted underneath the blasting music. He can feel the hot pinprick of dozens of eyes on him, and he doesn't even care. He's laughing, too. It's an incredible move. Billy must've made a fucking killing back when he first moved to Chicago.

The song ends right on cue, progressing smoothly into the next. Billy rises agilely to his feet, turns, and steps out, down a small staircase behind the stage. Steve moves back to wait for him, head in the clouds. When he rounds the platform, he's tugging his pants back up over his thighs, t-shirt stuffed and dangling out of his back pocket.

"So?" Billy says, combing his fingers through his sweaty hair. He's lit up, almost jittery, like he gets when he needs a cigarette. "That do anything for you, pretty boy?"

Steve can't take his eyes off him. He forgets himself. Reaches up to run his hands along Billy's slick chest, presses in close. "I'm not the one who should be getting called 'pretty' right now," he says. "That was incredible. You looked amazing. I had - no idea -"

"What, that I can dance or that I'd willingly put myself in a cage?" He says, laying his hands lightly on Steve's hips, and Steve wants to kiss him, wants to knock him to ground and take him right there, onlookers be damned.

"That you could move like that. That you used to do that for money. All of it."

"I work hard for this body, Harrington, I'm not gonna let it go to waste."

"That's fair," Steve says, distantly aware that he can't stop fucking smiling, sure he looks somewhere between a lovesick puppy and a starstruck fan.

“Dance with me,” Billy says, then, eyes boring into Steve’s.

“Oh, I -”

Billy cuts in before he can make any excuses. “C’mon, I’m not done, and you can’t be the only one not dancing. It’s part of the experience.” With big, pleading eyes, he levels Steve with one last killer look and adds, “Just give me three songs. That’s all I ask.”

“Alright, let’s do it.” It’s easy to agree, the way he’s feeling. With Billy sturdy and warm against him, he’s not even scared. He’s having fun. And after that show he just got, he’d do pretty much anything Billy asked right now.

He watches shock and satisfaction pass over Billy’s face in turns, then Billy’s taking him by the hand and pulling him to the middle of the dance floor. Once they’re in place, Billy throws his arms up over Steve’s shoulders, aligns their bodies, and starts to move.

Sweat is prickling over his forehead and temples within seconds, but it’s good. Like working out, like playing basketball. With Billy’s guidance, he starts to give himself over to it. Finds that his body is surprisingly agreeable. It’s not that he’s never danced before, but not like this, not wrapped around another person, churning and roiling with this sort of hectic energy. He has to admit it’s freeing.

Tucked this deep into the throng, he feels invisible after all. Like it’s just him and Billy, connected in all ways, two bodies in perfect sync. Akin to sex, but different. Endless. It feels good to move his body like this, to have Billy pressed up against him. He leans in, burying his nose in Billy’s neck, soaking in that familiar, comforting smell. Fuck it - let them see. Let everyone watch, if they want. He’s here with Billy, and Billy’s the hottest fucking guy in the room.

“Not so bad, is it?” Billy says in his ear.

Steve shakes his head, grins against Billy’s skin. “Not so bad,” he agrees.

One song passes, then another, and Steve finds he has no intention of stopping. All the stress and tension he’s carried with him all night is

draining away, euphoria settling into their place. Like a runners high, but better. By the end of the third song, he's soaked in sweat, but he just keeps going.

He needed this. He hadn't known it - but Billy did, he'd said as much a few hours ago, and he was right. Maybe they both did. He can feel how lost they both are in the wild, carnal allure of the dance, how swept away they are in the seemingly infinite music. Billy's grinding against him and when he pulls back, Billy looks somewhat dazed, eyes a little glazed over as they meet Steve's.

And Steve just can't fucking help it, couldn't stop it even if he wanted to. He tips his head forward and catches Billy in a kiss.

Billy melts into it instantly, arms falling from Steve's shoulders down to fold around his back. He tilts his head, and their lips slot together as perfectly as their bodies, tongues meeting in their own slow, practiced waltz. Steve reaches up to bury a hand in Billy's hair, his other hand exploring Billy's bare torso at will, every inch of skin he can reach.

Eventually, Steve breaks the kiss, takes a deep gulp of hot air. "When you were up there," he says, because he just can't hold it in, because he thinks Billy would want to know, "all I could think about was how much I wanted to fuck you."

"They all wanna fuck me," Billy says, cocky as ever and even sexier for it. "But only you can. Only you, Steve. Everyone here wants us and they can't fucking have us. Let's rub it in their fucking faces."

"Yeah, fuck yeah," Steve nods, not even sure what he's agreeing to but hurrying to kiss Billy again. Closes his eyes and keeps nodding absently into the kiss.

"You should take this off," Billy says, hands bunching in the damp fabric of his shirt and pulling it up. "You'll feel a hell of a lot better."

And this, Steve agrees to, too, letting go of Billy just long enough to drag his shirt over his head. He's glad to be rid of his stupid goddamn polo anyway. Not sure what to do with it, he drapes it around his neck, but Billy's right, he does feel better. Even though it's hot and



stuffy on the dance floor, he's happy to feel air against his back at all. He takes hold of Billy again, pressing their chests together, skin on skin, and somehow that's even better, even more refreshing.

At some point, Joel finds them, has to give Billy's shoulder a little shake just to get their attention. Even then, they don't stop dancing.

"I gotta take off," he shouts. "You guys alright?"

"Yeah, we're good," Billy is quick to assure him.

"I can see that," Joel says, looking between them with an amused, discerning smile. "Have a good night, you two."

They watch him walk away, then Billy looks back at Steve, a little spellbound.

"I'm really glad you came out with me tonight," he says.

A warmth spreads through Steve that has nothing to do with the crowded dance floor or the way he's exerting himself. All he can do is go in for another kiss, just happy to be alive, here in this moment, with Billy.

~\*~

If this isn't the best night of his life, Billy isn't sure what else could top it. The closest he can figure is maybe the day he left his father's home for good, but he'd ended up pulling over halfway to Chicago and sobbing his guts out just from the sheer relief of it all being *over*.

But that's pretty goddamn far away from this. Billy doesn't want any of this to be over, and nobody's going to be crying tonight.

Steve is lingering around him, never too far from his side. Billy wasn't sure if Steve would even let Billy touch him while they were out. Well. Consider those fears put to rest. Between his tongue down Billy's throat and fingers dipping into his jeans on the dance floor, Steve basically went hurtling over that self-imposed taboo. The way

he's looking at Billy, the way he's not letting him get too far away, there's no way anyone looks at the two of them and doesn't get it.

For once, Steve is acting like he gets it too. Billy's not a moron. He doesn't have any fantasies of going to a Sox game holding Steve's hand. Just because they can't go groping each other in public like breeders doesn't mean that every other thing is shut off to them, though. They don't have to hide in some hotel, meeting up only to fuck and pretending that there's nothing else to it. They can be *something*. All around them are people who the rest of the world would gladly shit on, but they're just like everyone else except stronger. Steve finally gets to see that, and he's not acting afraid to touch Billy in public, and God, does it feel good.

Some people, they can just be whoever they are without needing a push. Other people need to see a thing in motion before trying it for themselves. Billy's worked a lot to be the former, and Steve's the latter, and that's fine, because he just touched the small of Billy's back, where all the sweat is finally starting to dry.

Billy shuts his eyes a moment when Steve brushes up against him. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Tilting his head towards Steve, Billy asks, "Why?"

"Why do you think?"

"I got a roommate. You think you have to be quiet at the hotel, I can't wait to see you try to shut up when I get my hands on you tonight."

Steve looks nervous for a moment, but then he says, "Big words."

Billy looks down at himself pointedly. "Big everything. C'mon."

He reaches down and takes Steve's hand, not letting him think about it. Billy leads him towards the door, slipping past familiar faces and familiar bodies. He doesn't look at any of them, not really. Why would he? He's holding onto the one guy he really wants.

When they step outside, it's dark and the breeze makes Billy want to curl in on himself and throw his arms wide at the same time. There

are people milling around out front, saying goodbye, chatting, in this liminal space between the real world and the truth. Billy lets Steve go, because he knows he has to. But not wanting to. Really not wanting to.

With a sigh, Billy starts walking, and Steve goes along with him. They start to leave the bar behind.

“This was good,” Steve says.

Lifting his brows, Billy replies, “Yeah?”

Steve nods, smiling a bit. He’s got that idiotic polo shirt back on, which is a shame, but it just means Billy can literally tear it off him when they get back to the apartment. “It was...different.”

“Different can be good.”

Steve raises his shoulder, not wanting to say it out loud, but Billy can see it in his face.

Billy glances over as they pass Julian, waiting at the bus stop. Billy gives him a small nod; they’re not friends, but they know the same people. The guy turns his eyes to Steve, and smirks. “Looks like someone already popped your cherry.”

Billy sees Steve flinch. In seconds, he goes from smiling to hunching his shoulders. Billy narrows his eyes at Julian, then turns back to Steve.

Giving it a few steps, Billy asks, “What was that about?”

Steve shrugs and says with no conviction, “No idea.”

Okay. The night suddenly seems a bit wobbly. Billy decides to leave well enough alone. The last few hours have been so good. A couple words from some guy who doesn’t even know Steve can’t be enough to derail things.

After a block walked in silence, with that tense expression on Steve’s face, Billy starts to wonder if maybe it can.

“You all right?” he asks, and reaches over.

Steve dodges away from his hand, like Billy’s poison. Steve stuffs his hands in his pocket. “Can you not touch me?”

Billy looks around. There’s a few people out, people who definitely weren’t at the club. But it’s not like anyone gives a shit if one guy touches another for two seconds.

“What?” Billy says. “You think I’ve got something that’s catching?”

“Let’s just get back to your place.”

This is getting frustrating. Billy pushes his hair back from his face. “Steve, don’t be like this, man. We’ve had a really good night—”

“Yeah, so can we—not?”

“Yeah, no, it’s really cool that you’re treating me like a leper in public. Rad.”

Steve stops and looks right at Billy. He seems frustrated, but Billy doesn’t know why he would be—for Christ’s sake, what is going on here?

“Seriously, do you not understand that in there is different from out here?”

“Are you high? I’ve been going to places like that a lot longer than you have. I think I might get the difference.”

“So stop being weird.”

“Weird? I’m the one being weird?”

Steve lets out a sigh and tries to walk away, but Billy gets in front of him.

“You got something to say, go ahead. You think you need to explain something to me? I’m all ears.”

Shaking his head, Steve looks away and mutters, “Maybe I shouldn’t

have come up here.”

Wow. That happened...fast. Billy is about to respond when he realizes that if he does, things might get real ugly, real fast. Instead, he turns his back on Steve and keeps walking towards the train.

After a few seconds, he hears Steve’s sneakers hitting the pavement as Steve jogs to catch up. “Look, don’t just take off—”

“Steve, I don’t know what’s going on right now, but that’s a low blow.”

“What is?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come up here,” Billy mocks. “If you’re trying to hurt my feelings, you’re going to have to try a lot harder than that.”

“Hurt your—Jesus, Billy, of course I’m not trying to—would you slow down?”

Billy stops, raising his shoulders. “What do you want? Do you want people to look at us and not get that we even know each other, or do you want to have a conversation? How long do you think you can keep having it both ways?”

“Keep having it—how do you think I’ve had it both ways?”

Billy drags his hands over his face, groaning. Is this where they want to have this discussion? Out on the street, middle of the night, Steve jumpy that people might look at them and actually know the truth. “Steve, I know you’re not stupid.”

“How am I acting stupid?”

“Please don’t. This is ridiculous enough without becoming a snake eating its own tail.”

“You’re gonna have to spell it out for me, because I am lost right now.”

Scampering back to his hidey hole, more like it. Billy inhales and

exhales through his nose before saying, “How long did you expect us to just stay in hotel rooms, fucking one another’s brains out, and pretending once we got outside that we didn’t give a shit about each other?”

Steve doesn’t say anything. It looks like he doesn’t know what to say.

“That’s not even really true. When we leave that shitty, cockroach covered place, I don’t act like you don’t exist. I tell my friends about you—”

“Don’t,” Steve says, suddenly seeming panicked.

Flabbergasted, Billy says, “What?”

Steve hesitates, then says, “Don’t talk to your friends about me.”

Billy stares at him. Steve has to be kidding right now. Billy knows he isn’t, but he can’t be serious about this. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because,” Steve says, and falters.

“Because what? Because I should be ashamed? I’m not ashamed. I’m not ashamed of anything we’ve done—”

“Keep your voice down—”

“I’m speaking at a normal volume,” Billy hisses. “You’re being paranoid. Nobody—” Billy gestures around them. “Gives a shit about what we do.”

“Maybe that’s true for you but it isn’t for me.”

Steve obviously regrets it as soon as he says it, but Billy’s not going to let go so easily. “Right, you’ve got family and friends who love you. Awesome. I do too, except the people who love me actually know who I am.”

“You know that wasn’t what I meant.”

“Yeah it is. You’ve got this—idea in your head that guys like us don’t get to be happy, that we don’t get to be with someone and have that

be a good thing, but can you tell me that you walked out of that place thinking about how miserable everybody looked? And for Christ's sake, if you don't stop looking sick because I said 'guys like us,' I'm going to smack you."

"I'm not..."

Billy drops his head back on his shoulders. " *Steve* . You're gay. Okay? Gay, gay, super gay—"

"I'm *not* ." Steve points back the way they came. "Do I seem anything like those people? There wasn't a single person in there that I had anything in common with."

Incredulous, Billy says, "You all like dick."

"That doesn't make me—like them." Billy lets out a disbelieving snort, and Steve says emphatically, "It *doesn't* . You want to act like I'm like those people, but I'm not. You want to make me like those people, but I'm nothing like them."

Billy runs a hand through his hair. Suddenly, the fight drains from him. This is too clichéd. "I don't want to do this," he says. "Let's go home."

He tries to walk away, but this time it's Steve who stops him. "No! Don't just—you want to stop talking about this like it's not worth talking about, but you're not listening to me. Just because we do what we do doesn't make me—it doesn't change who I am."

"Okay, fine."

"Are you listening to me?"

"Steve, I don't know what you want me to say. I can say, 'sure, you're right,' but I've seen a lot of guys say what you're saying right now and—"

"I don't give a shit what anyone else said, I'm telling you what I'm saying."

Billy chews on his lower lip and shrugs. "So—what? You just want to

keep showing up at a motel to fuck once a week?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Billy knows Steve isn’t this dumb. He’s scared and panicking, but Billy doesn’t have the patience to handhold him through it. No one coddled Billy when he was figuring all this shit out. “That’s all you want from me?”

“What else is there?”

All in. Billy isn’t a coward. God knows he’s plenty of things, but if Steve wants to do this—if Steve wants to pretend to be this blind—Billy doesn’t have to give in.

“How about, we like each other, and we like to be around one another?” Steve makes a face, like he’s actually tasted something sour. It only spurs Billy on. “How about, I had a fucking crush on you in high school and I tried to beat your face in because I couldn’t kiss it? How about seeing you is the best part of my goddamn week, and my life is already pretty fucking good, Steve. There’s a whole lot more to this—” Billy gestures between the two of them. “Than you driving back to Hawkins once you’ve gotten enough of me on my back.”

Steve is moving backwards, as if he’s repelled by what he’s hearing, and it only makes Billy desperate. “I don’t need to hear this.”

“No, you don’t *want* to hear this. You don’t get to just fuck me and then act like I don’t exist.”

Irritated, Steve says, “You’re acting like you’re my fucking girlfriend right now.”

“Maybe because my asshole boyfriend is being a real idiot.”

Steve does that thing again. Like what Billy’s saying makes him want to shudder. “You know what I meant—”

“Do you need me to tell you how I feel about all this? Because I know we don’t do a whole lot of talking about what this actually is—”



“I really don’t want to hear it—”

“I’d be thrilled if you were my boyfriend,” Billy says, “even if you can be a real oblivious prick sometimes. I like the hell out of you. I want to read your stories and share a cigarette with you and wake up in the same bed, and not have that bed be in a fucking dive somewhere that no one will ever see us together. I’m not—I’m not asking you to be anything you’re not. I like you this way, I like you exactly this way, I just—I’m not going to pretend like I don’t want more.”

He waits for a reaction. Steve has looked down the street the whole time he’s been speaking, leg twitching like he’s about to take off.

Steve puts his hands up and makes a T motion with them.

In disbelief, Billy says, “What the fuck? You think this is football and you can just time out—”

“I don’t want this,” Steve says.

“Steve—”

“I don’t want to be your boyfriend,” Steve says bluntly. “I don’t want anyone to know that I know you. I don’t want anyone to know what we’ve done. Ever. I don’t know how you got this idea in your head that it was anything other than what it was, but it was you and me fucking, and that was it.” Steve looks right at Billy as he speaks, squaring his jaw. “I don’t know if you’re in some weird little bubble out here in the city, but I’m out in the real world, and this isn’t part of that. We’ve had fun, but I don’t...when it comes down to it, man, I don’t care about this that much.”

This is starting to hurt. It hurts because Billy knows it’s not true, but it hurts even more because he’s scared that Steve might actually mean it.

When Billy doesn’t say anything, Steve must take that as a signal to keep going. “I don’t want more than once a week. I want this for as long as it’s nothing, and then I want to get married, and have kids, and be normal. Okay? This—is not normal. It’s fine for a weekend, but this isn’t me. This is just what happens until real life starts.”

Billy takes a second, then says quietly, “You’re really going to stand there and tell me this hasn’t been real.”

Steve doesn’t even reply.

This is unacceptable. They haven’t come this far for it to all fall apart.

Billy says, “This won’t just go away if you find some girl and pretend to love her and marry her. This doesn’t stop, it’s who you *are* —”

Steve finally snaps. “It’s not! I don’t want this! If you want to stay here with the other freaks and pretend, I don’t give a shit. This—is not—my life!”

For close to five seconds, neither of them says anything.

Billy’s jaw feels heavy. Right at the back. He’s not sure if he’s going to throw up or cry.

Steve passes a hand over his face, then sighs. “Look...” He doesn’t get any further than that. Like he doesn’t even want to.

That makes this marginally easier. “Okay,” Billy says, resolved. “I’m going to stand right here. The train is two blocks that way, and you take the one south for 10 stops, and the apartment is just down the street from the stop. When I get home, your car needs to be gone.”

Steve brushes his hair off his forehead, grimacing. He steps away. “Listen—I’ll call you—”

“No. Don’t call, don’t write, don’t anything. I’m done.”

That seems to stop Steve dead in his tracks. He stands there with his mouth open like a fish for a moment.

“We’ve got a good thing here,” Steve says.

Billy nods, blinking more than he should. “Yeah,” he says steadily. “It sucks you can’t see that.”

Steve does nothing, and for a few seconds, Billy wonders if he’ll finally get it. If this shakes him, if it gets him to admit—

Steve turns and walks away from him, towards the train.

Billy swallows a few times. He turns his back. He's not going to look to see Steve leave him for good. He's not going to give a single inch.

Why should he? He's fought to get this far.

Billy reaches up, pressing against his eyes, then takes a quick sniff. He starts walking, back to where the other freaks live. He'll be where people are honest, even if it hurts.

Christ knows it's a hell of a lot better than wherever Steve is going.

## 5. Chapter 5

It's been 35 days.

35 long, meandering, aimless days.

Not that he's been keeping count. Not on purpose, anyway. When Steve wakes up that dreary October morning, it's to roll over in bed and realize this day is just as bleak as the rest. He sighs, folds his hands over his stomach, stares at the ceiling, trying to generate a reason to get out of bed.

It's Saturday, and he's got nothing to do. Nothing to look forward to. Just... nothing.

He's been working extra hours at the country club, just for something to keep him busy, make him feel like there's a point to his flesh and bones. He'd asked for a shift for that day, but his boss only laughed, clapped him on the shoulder and said, "You're too young to work so hard. Go out and find yourself a pretty girl!"

Steve scrubs his hands over his face. Drags them down his cheeks with a heavy sigh.

He should probably get up and have some breakfast, a bowl of cereal or something, but he's pretty sure he's let the milk go bad. The thought of showering makes him want to groan when he remembers how clogged the drain is. Maybe that's what he'll do today. Finally get the hair out of the shower drain. Go buy some fresh milk. He thinks fleetingly about calling one of the kids, seeing what they're up to - and isn't that pathetic? They're not even around. They're off at school. They're living their own lives. Steve - he's not sure whose life he's living. Doesn't feel like his, though. If he ever had his own life at all.

There's Nancy, just a couple hours away in Indianapolis. She'd make space for him in her day, he knows she would. But he's not sure he's ready to see her again after last week. What a fucking mess that was.

It comes back to him in flashes as he drags himself out of bed, plods

to the bathroom, starts going through the motions. The way he was burning up inside at the movie theater, watching John Cusack hold up that stupid boombox under the window of the woman he loved, while next to him Nancy rubbed her thumb in slow circles over Jonathan's hand. The way he snapped at them at dinner afterwards, for asking him too many questions about what he's been up to and how he's been doing. For daring to be so happy and driven and fulfilled, so *blatant* about it, when he was such a goddamn wreck.

The way he'd broken down when he'd gotten her alone. Told her everything. Absolutely fucking everything. The look on her face as she took it all in: how he had found bliss in the most unlikely of places. And how he'd fucked it all up.

He fucks everything up.

No, he's not ready to see her again.

Even though she was understanding. Even though, deep down, he's glad she knows. The weight of his secret doesn't feel so heavy anymore. It always twisted him up inside, keeping something so huge from her. She deserved his truth and he's glad she finally has it. But that doesn't make him any less of an asshole.

Really, this is what he gets.

He deserves to live this way, for tossing aside the one person who actually fucking saw him, all of him, all the way down, and still found something worthwhile, all for the sake of - what? To preserve some nebulous, hypothetical future where all his nonexistent dreams come true? To avoid having to face the fact that he's not the person he thought he'd become when he was a kid?

He'd tried at school - he'd really fucking tried. First high school, then college, for a while. Didn't really work out. He'd taken the job his parents had gotten for him, worked hard at that too. After the horrors of everything that had happened years ago, he'd done everything he could to be the person everyone in his life needed him to be. Protector, cheerleader, role model. He'd followed the steps, checked off all the boxes - and he still wasn't happy.

The truth is, he was at his happiest when he was with Billy.

And isn't that the point, he thinks, as he shuffles around his kitchen, opening up a package of stale Pop Tarts and sticking them in his toaster — to be happy? If you don't feel alive, are you even really living?

That's how Billy made him feel. Alive. Hopeful. Safe in his own skin. When he was with Billy, he was more than the sum of his parts. And he just — threw it away.

Ah, well. No one ever accused him of being smart.

Sitting at his rickety kitchen table, he hears the metallic clang of his mailbox as the flap bangs closed. He sets his warm Pop Tart down on his plate, pinches the bridge of his nose. Another day of bills, junk mail. If he's lucky he'll have a letter from Dustin, telling him all about the latest thing he blew up or dissected. Dustin loves college, and it makes Steve smile to hear him gush over it. But it kinda makes his heart hurt, too. He always feels bad about that.

Still in his pajamas, he walks over to the front door, opens it, and grabs the stack of mail, then sits back at the table to resume his breakfast while he sorts through it.

It's all as expected. Except — Steve does a double-take, blinks hard down at the envelope in his hands. A solid minute passes by before he slides a finger under the flap, opens the letter with shaking hands.

He's hot all over, his blood rushing, heart pounding, head swimming as he reads what's inside.

*Holy shit.*

He sets the letter down, looks around the room, takes stock of himself. Everything seems so clear, suddenly, like stepping out of a dense fog.

What is he *doing*?

He may not know exactly who he is, but he knows who he isn't. He isn't a coward. There's a life for him outside of this. And that life - it

begins with Billy.

With the most certainty he's felt in so long, he makes his decision.

Each passing landmark - the fireworks store, the water tower, the barn - brings with it a confusing cocktail of longing and shame. They make him itch to turn the wheel, to get off the interstate and go straight to that beautiful, terrible, perfect place that changed him without him even realizing it.

Seeing them brings Billy's rich earthy scent to his nose, the warmth of Billy's skin to his fingertips. He drives past the factory with its huge smokestacks and suddenly the sounds of Billy are ringing in his ears - his gasps and groans, the way he hums from deep in his chest when he's pleased with something Steve's done. God, he misses that. He misses all of it so much and, like a Pavlovian response, catching a glimpse of those landmarks makes him feel like he's about to get it.

He isn't, of course. There's no saying how this will go.

That's where the shame comes in. He can't remember the taste of Billy without also recalling the taste of all the nasty things he'd said that night.

*I don't want anyone to know what we've done.*

The Value Inn - it was really nothing more than a lie. There's something real for him, a couple hundred miles away. If he can get it.

He just has to get there.

He takes the drive at a punishing pace, breaking several speed limit laws along the way and only stopping once, but when he parks across the street from Billy's three-flat, he - can't get out of the car.

His nerves are alight and tingling, his breath short. Now that he's here, what he needs to do feels insurmountable and imperative all at once. He spends several minutes checking his hair in the rearview, then checking again, trying to get each strand to fall into perfect place. Kicks himself for not bringing any emergency hairspray. He starts digging around in the glove compartment, the center console, as if he might find some in there, but he knows he won't. He's just buying himself time.

All through his drive, he'd been rehearsing what he's going to say. He keeps that rehearsal going strong as he rifles through napkins and crumpled paperwork, muttering under his breath.

The knock on his window makes him jump so hard he almost hits the roof.

Billy is standing just outside the car, arms crossed, squinting down suspiciously through the window. Steve's heart lurches immediately. God, he looks good - earring in, shirt parted midway down his chest, jacket hanging open at his sides, pants tight. Classic Billy. Steve has recalled his image so many times in the last month, but imagination doesn't come close to the real thing. Billy shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head as if to say, *what the hell are you doing?*

Steve rolls down the window, plastering on his best innocent expression. "You told me not to call, so, I didn't call."

But Billy's not buying it. He only shifts on his feet, face stony. "That wasn't an invitation for you to just show up."

"I - I needed to talk to you."

"I dunno," Billy says, voice flat in a way that fucking *hurts*. "I think we pretty much covered everything last time."

Steve lets out a hard breath. He'd expected this, was sure he'd be able to get Billy to hear him out, but what if he can't?

"Can you just get in the car?" he asks, exasperated.

Billy folds his arms tighter. "Why, so you can kidnap me, leave my body rotting in another shithole motel?"



“Well, that’s a little dramatic.”

“I’m not getting in the car until you tell me what you want.”

“I told you, I want to talk.”

“So talk,” Billy says, firm and challenging.

Steve looks around. “Right here in the street?”

“Why,” Billy says. “You afraid the neighbors might see?”

Steve keeps his voice level. He deserves that. “No, it’s just a little hard to talk to you through an open window and I’m pretty sure you’re not about to show me in to your place.”

Billy sighs, glances back at his apartment building. He deflates a little, shoulders slumping. “That’s true, I’m not.”

“So, can you get in?” Steve says, then, after a beat, “Please.” He can see Billy weighing his options as he stands there, looking Steve over and huffing. In the end, the earnestness on Steve’s face must be enough to tip the scales.

“Fine.” Billy rounds the car and gets in, slamming the door behind him. “But the Chicago P.D. has, like, a 60% success rate at solving murders so if you kill me, you’ll probably get caught.”

Well, Steve thinks, he’s making jokes, so that’s a good sign. It warms him to hear the humor in Billy’s voice, but he goes cold when Billy adds, “And I’m not gonna fuck you in the car, either.” Steve flinches.

A long moment passes, still and silent, before Billy says, sounding annoyed, “So?”

“We’re close to the lake, right?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess. It’s a few miles east.”

“Alright,” Steve says, before turning the ignition. They ride along in tense silence, but it feels good to have Billy next to him again. The heat of him, his scent filling the car. Nothing’s alright, but even being

able to hear the sound of Billy breathing, shifting in his seat, gives the illusion that it is. At least Billy's with him. At least they're gonna talk. Billy mutters a couple directions when they get close, not looking at Steve. Just staring out the windshield, jaw clenched.

They pull into a makeshift gravel parking lot. Steve turns off the car and wastes no time getting out. In front of them is a bit of grass and trees edging a bike path. On the other side of the path is a long row of steep concrete steps that seem to stretch for a mile in either direction, several feet above the endless blue lake which laps noisily at the stone wall below. Steve crosses the bike path, climbing halfway down the concrete levels and perches himself on the edge of one step. He holds his breath and doesn't look back. Hopes that Billy will join him.

Before long, Billy settles down next to him with a long-suffering sigh. There aren't many people around - the occasional jogger panting their way down the path, a couple kids on skateboards. It feels almost like they're alone, though it doesn't bother Steve that they're technically not.

Steve watches the seagulls and tries to think of how to start. Billy just sits quietly, waiting, keeping his eyes on the water, but Steve looks right at him when he speaks.

"So, first of all, you have every right to be mad."

Billy snorts, rolls his eyes. "No shit."

"What I said was totally out of line. I was a fucking dick. I shouldn't have—"

"Yeah, you were a dick," Billy cuts in. "But you were just being honest. Better that you told me how you felt before we wasted any more time."

"No, I wasn't being honest. I mean, I thought I was, but - I don't know." Steve tips his head back, as if begging for answers from the sky, any kind of divine intervention. "I was just - freaked out."

"Again, no shit."

Billy's not giving him an inch, but that's fair. If he wants Billy's forgiveness, his understanding, he's going to have to earn it. "I didn't like people thinking they knew who I was when *I* didn't even know who I was," he tries to explain. "I felt like—" Steve flaps his hands, at a loss. "Like people were judging me."

That gets Billy to look at him. "And you don't think I feel judged every day of my life? That's just how it is. People judge us, they're always gonna judge us. But *I* never judged you," he says. "So you didn't have to be such an asshole."

"No I - I know," Steve concedes. "I know. I'm sorry."

"That was a great fucking night, you know?" Billy snaps, riled up suddenly, like this is something he's been dying to get off his chest. "And now I can't even think of it without feeling like shit."

"It *was* a great night. I had a lot of fun. It just—it just made things so real," Steve says, a hint of desperation in his voice, willing Billy to understand. "Everything got so real, so fast, and I—said a lot of things I shouldn't have said. That I didn't mean. It just seemed easier."

"Easier than what, chilling the fuck out?"

"Than, I don't know, redefining myself?" Steve says. He hasn't really had to break it down like this before now. It comes to him as he's speaking. "For years, I've been thinking of myself as just—some loser townie, who works and gets married and dies and that's it," he says, counting off the steps on his fingers. "I accepted that a long time ago. Simple. Predictable, you know?" He pauses to rub at the back of his neck while he thinks. "And the way everyone at that bar knew exactly who they were—the way *you* know exactly who you are—was so intimidating. I thought I didn't fit in with anyone there. At all. So when you told me I was just like them... I freaked."

Billy's still looking at him, seems to be listening. Another good sign, so he goes on. "But I couldn't stop thinking about that night, how good it felt. How bad I fucked up. Everything you said. I know you didn't want anything to do with me after that, but—I had to come see you."

"Why now? What changed?" Billy asks skeptically, the hard edge lingering in his tone.

And Steve - he actually has answer for that.

"It's because of this," he says, pitching to one side to extract a folded piece of paper from his back pocket. He hands it over, watches Billy's reaction as he unfolds it and reads. Steve knows what it says, can practically recite it by heart at this point, having read it through so many times at his breakfast table: *We are pleased to inform you that your submission has been accepted, to be published in our 'Breakthrough & Up-and-Coming Horror Authors' feature in December's issue of "Weird Tales" magazine.*

He'd sent it in the day after their breakfast, high on Billy's encouragement. Their fight had put it completely out of mind. It wasn't until he received that letter that he'd even remembered he'd submitted anything.

Billy seems to linger on the page, swallowing as he digests it. "Congratulations," he says, before looking up slowly, a little awed. "Steve, that's—that's really great."

"It's because of you."

Billy raises a perplexed eyebrow.

"You told me to do something with it."

"Since when do you listen to me?"

"Believe me, I know I'm an idiot," Steve says, chancing a small smile. "But the things you say," he taps his temple, "actually do sink in. I've—always cared what you thought of me."

"You're not an idiot," Billy says, then clarifies, "well, not all the time. You weren't an idiot when you wrote your story." He folds up the letter, hands it back. "I *told* you it was good."

Steve slips it back into his pocket. "I know, you were right," he says. "That I don't have to die in Hawkins. You were right about a lot of things."

“So that’s why you’re here? To tell me you’re getting published?”

“No,” Steve’s quick to answer. “I mean, kinda. I was excited to tell you that, but, no, I just—” He hides his face in his hands, breathing out hot and hard into his palms before dropping them back into his lap. He can hear the faint cracking in his own voice when he says, “Fuck, Billy. I missed you, okay? I missed you. I couldn’t stand the idea of never seeing you again.”

That seems to throw Billy off his guard. His eyes widen marginally, but he doesn’t say anything. Just - looks. So Steve forges on.

“And I thought about what you said. About waking up next to each other and all that stuff. About having more. I—I want that. I mean, that sounds... really fucking good, honestly. I like the person I am when I’m with you. I want to be that person all the time.”

Billy doesn’t look angry anymore. Doesn’t look like he’s seconds away from throwing Steve out of his life for good. He’s starting to look like himself again. “What, a small town queer?” he says, teasingly.

Steve knows Billy’s joking, but he stops to turn the question over in his mind anyway. “I don’t know if I’m gay.” Billy makes a face at that, so Steve amends, “Okay, okay, I probably am, but—I never thought of myself that way. It’s hard. But I do like you. I like every part of you, and I know that means something about me. Nothing bad, just... different.”

Billy looks down at the space between them. Runs his fingertips lightly over the rough concrete. “Different can be good,” he says, glancing at Steve sideways. It hits Steve right away, an echo of what Billy said that night, before everything fell apart.

“I know,” Steve says, nodding. “But in Hawkins - it never has been. When things are different, that usually means someone’s gonna get hurt.” He can’t help but think about everything that happened. With Barb, with Will, everything. When Billy showed up, he was different from everyone else, and he was dangerous, too. Steve sighs, hoping Billy doesn’t read too much into things. “I was tired of fighting. I just wanted everything to be normal. I didn’t want anything to change.”

“And fucking me on the weekends wasn’t a change?” he says, without any bite.

“No, it was,” Steve agrees. “A good change. The best. But I thought if we just kept it, y’know, hidden, then it didn’t count. Everything could stay the same and I’d still be happy.”

Billy’s fingers clench. He seems to be itching to say something, but waits for Steve to go on.

“I wasn’t happy, though. I was miserable. Trying to fit the mold—it wasn’t working. You told me that I needed to be who I am and stop pretending, and you’re right.” Steve turns inward a bit, more towards Billy. “Hell, if I was going to try to be more like someone, it wouldn’t be any of them,” he says, gesturing over his shoulder with his chin, as if Hawkins is right behind them. “It’d be you.”

Billy’s head snaps up at that. He’s got that look on his face again, a little astonished, a little doubtful. “What? Why?”

“Because. You’re fucking brave, Billy,” Steve says, throwing as much conviction as he can behind his words. “You take risks. You got the hell out of there, and came here, and now you just... live. You don’t hide, you don’t apologize. And even if you don’t wanna be with me after what I did,” —his voice wavers, losing some of its intensity— “even if this is really over, I’m not gonna go back to how I was. I can’t.”

Looking a little guilty, Billy squirms in place, not meeting Steve’s eyes. “Look, I know I pushed you—”

“No, you were right to push me,” Steve says forcefully. “If you didn’t push me, I’d still be stuck in—” He thinks of the Upside Down again. That’s what his life felt like, really. A grim, distorted version of the truth. A life without hope. “I’d just—be stuck. You saw me when I couldn’t see myself. You dragged me out of my own head. I don’t think I can ever thank you for that.

“And listen,” he continues. “If you wanna forget it, I’ll take you home and never talk to you again. I’ll understand. But... we had a good thing going.”

“Yeah,” Billy says wistfully, “we did.”

“And I don't wanna forget about it. I want... more of it.” Steve sets his hand down next to Billy's between them, dying to take hold, but gripping the concrete instead. Needing to drive the point home, needing Billy to understand him clearly, he reiterates, “I want more.”

Billy softens—Steve sees it happen, attuned as he is to Billy's body—but then his eyes get a little distant, a little sad. “How can you be sure?” Billy asks. “How do I know you're not just gonna get freaked out again?”

Steve's mouth opens and closes while he considers. He looks out to the lake, the way the sunset reflects a brilliant gold over the water's surface, and blows out a long breath. “I can't promise you I'll never get scared. Change—is scary. I don't like it. I've never liked it. But, knowing you've got my back? That helps.”

“Of course I do,” Billy says, to Steve's surprise. His heart starts up a steady canter. “I'll always have your back.”

When Steve turns away from the water, looks over, he finds Billy's gaze instantly. Neither of them seem willing, or even able, to look away this time. He just keeps talking, can't seem to stop, the words streaming from him like a fountain. “When I'm with you, it's the most sure I ever am that things are going to be okay. That one way or another, everything's gonna be fine, because it's you and me. I never should've lost sight of that. I was stupid. I shouldn't have said what I said. I shouldn't have left.”

Billy turns inward now, too, so that their knees are touching. “I don't want to forget about it either. I don't even think I could—trust me, I tried. But... you've been in my head for, like, 6 fuckin' years. I can't forget about you. Even if I wanted to.”

Steve scoots closer, his heart kicking into a full-on gallop. He can't stop himself now from taking Billy's hand, lacing their fingers together. “I'm sorry, Billy,” he says, his chest tight, eyes burning, voice dripping with anguish he doesn't even try to hide. “I'm so sorry. For making you think I was ashamed of you. I wasn't. I'm ashamed of myself, for keeping you a secret and making you feel like you don't

matter, when, really,” he looks over Billy’s face, the words creeping up his throat. They’re so goddamn revealing, but for once, he’s not afraid of the truth. “You’re everything.”

“Steve...” Billy breathes.

“I want this. I want to do this with you.” His face inches closer to Billy’s, drawn in, unstoppable. “I’m ready. And I swear, I will never, never treat you like that again.”

Steve goes in for a risk of his own and reaches up to touch Billy’s cheek. He leans in, and asks, “Can I kiss you?”

“What if someone sees?” Billy says, thin and fragile.

“So what?” Steve whispers.

The kiss feels like weeks of waiting, like years of wanting. It’s like kicking off your shoes at the end of a long day, like finding shelter in a storm. It feels safe, and right, and *good*, and Steve wonders how he ever could’ve found it unnatural. It’s the most natural thing in the fucking world. He’s prepared to stay on this ledge, in this kiss, the whole night through.

Too soon, Billy brings it to an end, but Steve can feel the shape of Billy’s smile, feel Billy’s warm breath against his lips. And if he thought the kiss was good, hearing what Billy has to say next is somehow even better.

“Let’s go home.”

~\*~

They don’t say much to each other as they enter the apartment. They didn’t say much to each other on the drive over. Steve seems to have emotionally exhausted himself, and Billy can’t blame him. He doubts Steve has ever told someone he cares about them like that. Billy sure as hell has never had anyone talk to him that way.



No one has ever apologized to him like this and meant it. No one but Steve. Steve who Billy has missed like someone cut out his goddamn lungs. This morning it had been 35 days apart from one another. He's counted every single one.

Billy shuts the door quietly shut behind Steve. Steve looks over at him, his eyes somehow younger. Everything about him seems tentative, but still somehow light. "Your roommate going to be around?" Steve asks. It's definitely not a question asked because he's worried about how much noise they'll be making. It's a question he's asking because he wants them to be alone.

Billy's been wanted before, but never like this. And never by the one person he hoped would want him.

He shakes his head, and Steve nods. They stand a moment, eyeing one another.

Billy steps forward, cupping his hands to Steve's face, and kisses him. It's got absolutely nothing to do with sex. He's not doing this because it's the first step on the way to the bedroom. This is because he doesn't have the words to tell Steve what this means to him. Billy kisses Steve's lips as tender as he's able, brushing his nose gently against Steve's cheek.

When Billy needs to breathe, he finds Steve holding onto his jacket sleeves. Steve exhales against him, resting his forehead to Billy's. Billy shuts his eyes.

He's wanted this man for a lot of years. Now...now this man is his. No one else's. Just his. If anyone tries to take this man from him, Billy will set the world on fire.

Billy does something he's never done with anyone else. He wraps his arms around Steve, putting a hand to his hair, and lets Steve lay his head on Billy's shoulder.

It seems to be exactly what Steve needs. It takes a second, but Steve puts his arms around Billy's waist. He relaxes against Billy. Swallowing, Billy pets his ridiculous hair, crispy with hairspray. He strokes his fingertips along the nape of Steve's neck.

This is what he wanted. He could never say it to himself, because admitting to this would have been asking for failure. Now that he has it, though, Billy is awestruck. People just do this. Hold each other. Feel safe with one another. That he's allowed to do this—he couldn't describe it if he wanted to.

They stand together like that for awhile, a couple of saps. Finally, Billy thinks the sentimentality might kill him, and steps away. "C'mere," he murmurs, taking Steve's hand, and tugs him towards the bedroom.

Closing the door, Billy turns to Steve—and freezes. Steve's looking away from him, flicking at his eye with the side of his thumb.

Stumped, because Billy's brought plenty of guys back to this room, but none on the verge of tears, Billy takes a second to figure out what to do. When he can't come up with anything, he takes Steve by the front of his jean jacket. "Don't," he says gruffly.

"I'm not," Steve insists.

"Fucking don't."

"I'm *not*."

Billy doesn't believe him. He does the only thing he can think of, which is start undressing Steve. They might be a disaster, individually and as a unit, but they have consistently fantastic sex. If Steve keeps crying while they fuck, then something has gone terribly wrong.

Billy strips off an article of his own clothing for each he takes off Steve. Steve finally gets it together and starts undressing himself. Billy's got his hands on his zipper when Steve reaches out, pushing his hands up Billy's neck, and pulls him closer to kiss him.

It's good like this. Clothed from the waist down, bare from the waist up. Billy smooths his hand over Steve's skin, kneads his muscles. This feels like the start of something. The first time they got naked together, Steve was frantic, like he couldn't stop himself and was also desperate for it to end. There were very few clues that it was a thing

they'd be doing again. They *will* be doing this again.

"Bed," Billy murmurs against Steve's mouth. Steve nods, and Billy pulls him across the room, the both of them shedding the last of their clothing as they stumble in tandem.

They tumble onto the mattress. It's not actually a bed. Billy's never seen the point in a bed frame, when a mattress on the floor is just as comfortable. And no, his room is not particularly neat either. Not exactly a romantic setting, but Jesus, have either of them ever claimed to be romantic?

Steve has ended up partly in Billy's lap. They haven't stopped kissing, because that would be a stupid thing to do. Billy's arm is hooked around Steve to keep him close, rubbing his other hand over Steve's stomach. He slides his tongue across Steve's lips, and they just take their time.

Steve isn't rushing. Not the way he usually is. That says a lot.

They touch and they kiss and they enjoy one another.

When Billy is starting to get dazed, he takes Steve's chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Let's make a mess of this bed," he says.

Steve nods, pupils wide as dimes. Billy has to shift him to the side to find the condoms and lube stashed in the small pile of things at the bedside. Are they expired? He hasn't touched any of that shit since he and Steve started this thing, because he had no desire to bring another man into this room who wasn't Steve.

Turning back, Billy tears the package in his teeth, planning on doing this whole thing one handed or possibly also with his mouth. It's a thing Steve loves, and between driving all the way to Chicago and making things right, Billy wants to give him a really fucking fantastic night.

Instead, Steve grabs his wrist when Billy reaches down for him. Steve presses his lips together, those perfect lips with that goddamn cupid's bow. Billy figured out what a cupid's bow was just so he knew what to call the shape of Steve's mouth.

Steve swallows a few times, and Billy thinks he's going to tell him to toss the condom, which he's not going to do. Whether they're expired or not, he's putting one of these condoms on Steve. It's not that he doesn't trust him. It's just that the world is a fucking scary place, and he wants them both safe as houses.

Steve says, "Can we do it the other way?"

Billy has no idea what Steve's talking about. Except he takes in how fucking nervous Steve suddenly is, and he gets it.

It's too much. The apology, the unspoken decision that *this* is a thing, this is real. He's got Steve in his bed, and Steve wants to give him this. It's way too much for Billy.

So he stage whispers, "You want me to do it in your *butt*?"

Steve stares at him a moment.

Then he cackles, shoving Billy. Billy grabs him, kissing his face. "Why do I like you?" Steve laughs, twisting Billy's nipples in revenge.

"Harder," Billy says, pushing his chest up into Steve's hands.

Steve just jabs his thumb into one of the nubs, smiling up at Billy with appreciation. It was all getting way too serious and meaningful there. They can be that way, sure, but not all the time. One of them would lose it.

Biting his lower lip, Billy nods at Steve. "We can do that. If you're sure. I'm in no rush."

"It'd probably be easier if your dick was smaller, but...then your dick would be smaller." Steve shrugs, not pretending to be confident, but there's determination in his eyes. "Let's just fucking do it. Before I wuss out."

Billy waits a beat to make sure Steve means it. He does. He reaches for his own cock, rolling the condom down. "Seriously though—if you're not enjoying yourself—"

"For Christ's sake, Billy, just fuck me, would you?"

He takes Steve's wrists in one hand, pinning them at the top of the mattress. Nudging Steve's thighs wide with his knees, Billy rests between his legs and looks Steve in the eyes. "This'll hurt," he says honestly, and Steve's breath hitches. "But I'm gonna finger fuck you until you're about to cream. Then I'll fuck you for real. If that doesn't get you over the hump, I don't know what the hell will."

He does exactly what he says he will. Fingers inside Steve, watching him every second, Billy does every single thing he wishes someone had done for him his first time. He tells Steve exactly what he's doing, smiles when Steve reacts the way he hoped, praises him when Steve moans. When Steve's hips roll down, insisting on more, Billy bites Steve's lower lip lovingly, murmuring, "So good, babe. Fuck, you are so good."

When Steve starts to lose the ability to form coherent words, Billy withdraws his fingers. He tries to prompt Steve onto his knees.

"No," Steve mumbles. "I wanna—"

"Nope," Billy says. "Missionary might be boring for breeders, but that's not first level shit for us."

"We do it all the time."

"Yeah, but I'm a pro."

As Steve rolls onto his side, he mutters, "Told you at graduation. Felon or male hooker."

Billy shakes his head, but he's smiling. "You sure?"

Steve looks back over his shoulder, cheeks flushed, hair falling forward. "Yeah, I'm sure." He turns over, moving a leg around Billy's back.

"I just...I want this to be really good for you."

Steve lets out a breath. "Asshole. I'm here with you. Anything is gonna be great."

So Billy slicks his fingers so much it's almost difficult to get hold of

anything. He's hard as a spear, so that won't be a problem. But Steve is precious to him. He knows Steve's not going to take off if this is bad, but...

He wants this night to just be good memories for Steve.

Dry hand holding back one of Steve's thighs, he pushes in. Billy shuts his eyes so that he doesn't have to look at Steve's face. That might be a mistake, but on the other hand, if he looks at Steve while he does this, he might not even make it all the way in.

It's a good call, because when he does look, Steve has thrown an arm over his eyes. Teeth sinking into that plump lower lip. He's forcing himself to take slow, steady breaths.

Holding Steve by his sides, Billy squeezes a little. He wants to ask if Steve is okay, except he doesn't. If Steve needed him to stop, he would say so. So he should just...start.

He pulls back a few inches, and Steve lets out a low sound from the back of his throat. He reaches down, wrapping his hands around Billy's wrists. When Billy thrusts back in, Steve cries out. Only he's tugging on Billy's arms, prompting him down.

Billy almost slips downwards, liking their warmth together. Steve's feet are digging into the small of Billy's back, his mouth shivering against Billy's as they move. Steve is clutching handfuls of Billy's hair, every effort made to keep him close as possible.

"Perfect," Billy whispers between kisses. "Perfect, you're perfect."

Their bodies rock together, against one another, and Billy weaves the fingers of his one hand with Steve's. He licks Steve's lower lip, where teeth marks are still sunken in, and Steve looks up at him with wide eyes. His mouth parts, and Billy can see a word hanging there. He can see more than one trying to make their way out, but something holds Steve back.

That's fine. Billy's never been afraid of jumping in feet first.

Clutching Steve's hand, Billy whispers the words to him, and Steve shudders. The world outside vanishes, leaving the two of them, and

nothing else. Billy whispers the words to Steve over and over again, burying his face in Steve's neck.

Words don't count for much, but God, these ones say it all.

Billy cracks an eye open, sighing at having to wake up. His arm's asleep and he's too warm—

Steve's pinning his arm to the mattress.

Billy just gazes at him for a little while. Steve is faced away from him, shoulder digging into Billy's forearm, cutting off his circulation. Billy follows the lines of Steve's back. Wonders about some of the scars there. He reaches over and brushes his thumb down Steve's side.

Shifting slightly, Steve burrows against Billy's arm even more.

With a wince, Billy says, "Okay, buddy." He pushes Steve forward with his other hand and pulls his arm loose.

Disgruntled, Steve lifts his head. "Whadareyou," he slurs sleepily before losing his train of thought.

Curling his arm towards his chest, nothing but pins and needles, Billy says, "Morning."

Steve flops over and squints at Billy. His hair...Jesus, his hair. It hangs over his forehead, falls to the side, sticks up crazily in the back. It is the least put together Billy has ever seen, and it's fucking adorable. He never thought he'd think of anything that Steve Harrington did as adorable. But here they are.

Steve's hand lazily falls against Billy as he tries to fight upwards from sleep. "Morning," he mumbles.

Billy smiles, completely awake. "Sweet dreams?"

"Not really."

“No?”

“I dreamed about monsters.”

“More material for your stories, huh?”

Steve really looks at him, and smiles slightly. “Yeah.”

They stay like that for an embarrassing length of time. Smiling at each other like two idiots.

When Billy can't take it anymore, he says, “I just need to run to the store. I'm out of smokes.”

“We're naked. Right now. I don't understand your priorities, man.”

“Last night wasn't enough for you?”

“Billy—fucking *none* of this will ever be enough for me.”

Billy lowers his head a second, struggling not to beam like a kid. When he gets himself under control, he says, “I get cranky as shit when I haven't smoked. I'll just be a couple minutes.”

“I'll go with you. I need a coffee.”

“You want coffee, there's this diner I practically live at. It's a hell of a lot better than the one across from the no-tell motel.”

“Eggs?”

“It's a diner, dipshit, of course they have eggs.”

“Call me a dipshit again and you're not getting laid when we get back here.”

“Yeah I am. Dipshit.” Billy stands up and stretches, then offers Steve his hand. He hauls Steve to his feet and tugs him in close for a kiss. Steve strokes a hand up and down Billy's back, kissing the side of his mouth.

This time, Steve pulls Billy in for a hug. Billy closes his eyes and lays his head against Steve's.



“Who ever thought this would happen,” Steve murmurs, kissing Billy’s neck.

“You think this is bad? I never thought you’d let me see your hair like that.”

Stricken, Steve pushes him back, hand going to his hair. When he realizes what he’s done, he obviously braces for impact. He should. Billy starts to laugh. “Fuck off,” Steve grumbles, blushing.

“I don’t know how you ever thought you were straight,” Billy says, and smacks Steve on the ass before going to find some clothes that might even be clean.

They walk out into the city together, two young men with smiles on their faces that wouldn’t mean much to the people passing by, but mean the world to them. It’s a grey morning with a bit of a breeze. They chat about what they’re reading, if they should see a movie later, what Steve should spend the money from his story on.

Billy doesn’t ask the questions he wants the answers to. He doesn’t ask if Steve still means everything he said yesterday. He doesn’t ask if Steve will visit him more, or if Steve would consider moving up here, maybe using some of that publishing money. Billy leaves well enough alone.

He nearly walks out into the street without looking, and Steve grabs his arm, stopping him. A Ford Escort goes sailing by where Billy almost stepped, the driver putting up a middle finger. Billy grits his teeth, but he forgets it all when Steve pats his back and says, “Be careful. Don’t die the first morning we’re actually dating.”

Billy feels a warmth where Steve touched him. They keep walking, Steve talking about an idea he has for a new story. Billy glances over to see if Steve is looking around nervously, checking to see if Steve regrets what he just said. Instead, Steve gives him a quick smile and tells him about some monster he’s dreamed up.

Billy doesn’t need to ask questions. For now, Steve is meeting him

halfway. As for the rest?

They'll get there. Somehow, they always do.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

from xJuniperx - thank you for coming with us on this journey to self-discovery and self-love, and for all your kind comments!! you can find me (often yelling about these dumb boys) on tumblr at [twobrokenwyngs](#) if you want to come say hi. also, huge thanks to [corinne](#) and [andi](#) for being so generous with ideas and feedback along the way :D

and finally, one last happy birthday to my darling [estefania](#) - i hope it was wonderful ♥